

THE AFRO-DIASPORIC IMAGINING OF AFRICAN POWER, IDENTITY, AND  
SUBJECTION THROUGH DRESS

A Thesis

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a critically interrogation of the film *Black Panther* through the lenses of costume and the concept of Afrofuturism. Previous research has largely focused on the thematic structure and analysis of the content of the film thereby creating a gap in literature, especially on the relationship between the film and power/identity. Through reflections on the film, I interrogate notions of power and identity as demonstrated in the film forms.

The thesis begins with a history of films in America and the poorly-recognized contribution of African American actors and filmmakers to the development of the movie industry. In this, it situates *Black Panther* within the story of African Americans search for a truer representation of black life and aspirations, and the relationship between this story and African identity and Black power. I address the subject of identity using the concept of Afrofuturism. I consequently interpret *Black Panther* as Afrofuturistic because of the film's projection of an utopian futuristic society (by the name of Wakanda) of super-heroic Africans, African socio-economic independence, a rich natural resource called vibranium, and the elimination of all forms of racial subjugation. I suggest that as the first Black superhero movie of its magnitude, *Black Panther* redefines the African identity by the exemplifying Black heroism.

Michel Foucault's theory of power, which replaces traditional projections of power as sovereign with a new concept of power as discipline and biopower, forms the prime theoretical framework for this thesis. Foucault's theory of power further analysis of stereotypical representations of Black people in the history of American film. My centralized discussion of costume as a technique for projecting Afrofuturism and power in *Black Panther* concludes by drawing out the implications for Africans in the diaspora and *Black* people in America.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my Father, Chief Fidelis Onyenloni Adinku who constantly reminded me that I could achieve whatever goal I set to achieve as long as I believe in the cause. He set the foundation as he radically moved away from one of his generations' regime of truth that considered Western education for the girl child a waste of resource and a liability. Papa you insisted we your children get Western education because you believe it is the only tool that will pave the path to a better future for us and for your grandchildren. Thank you papa for insisting, encouraging, supporting and praying for us while you were here. Yes! we started this together but the cruel hands of death did not wait for you to witness this day with me.

Nevertheless, I can imagine your enchanting smile, warm embrace, and your gentle kind voice say to me 'WELLDONE SWEETHEART!'

Thank you papa.

I also dedicate this thesis to the memories of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and all the Black lives lost to racial discrimination and police brutality in the American system.

*"We are not brutalized because we're Muslims  
We are not brutalized because we're Catholics  
We are brutalized because we are Blacks" (Malcom X)*

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All work for the thesis was completed by the student, under the advisement of Dr. David Donkor of the Department of Performance Studies.

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## TABLE CONTENT

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vi
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. FROM “JAZZMANIA” TO <i>GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER</i> : Black Film History, Costume and Afrofuturistic Representation .....	6
2.1 Overview .....	6
2.2 Prefiguring Afrofuturistic Costume: <i>A Rhapsody in Black and Blue</i> and Jim Crow America .....	7
2.3 Affirming Blackness? Race and Black-Oriented Film in the Shadow of <i>Birth of a     Nation</i> .....	13
2.4 New Stereotypes: Poitier and the Bespoke Suit of Impeccable Blackness... ..	20
3. <i>BLACK PANTHER</i> AND AFROFUTURISM .....	28
3.1 Overview .....	28
3.2 The Contemporary Films (1970 to Date) .....	29
3.3 A Summary of the Story of <i>Black Panther</i> .....	38
3.4 Impact of <i>Black Panther</i> on the American Community and the World at Large	41
3.5 The Concept of Afrofuturism.....	44
4. MICHEL FOUCAULT’S THEORY OF POWER AND <i>BLACK PANTHER</i> .....	49
4.1 Overview.....	49
4.2 Background to Michel Foucault’s Analysis of Power.....	49
4.2.1 Michel Foucault on Types/Forms of Power.....	50
4.3 Michel Foucault’s Sovereign Power and its Demonstration in <i>Black Panther</i> ..	54
4.4 Power as the Regime of Truth in <i>Black Panther</i> .....	55
4.5 How is Wakanda’s Regime of Truth Challenged in the Film?.....	60
4.6 The Role Costume plays in maintaining the regime of truth in <i>Black Panther</i> film .....	62

5. CONCLUSIONS.....	66
WORK CITED .....	69

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### THE AFRO-DIASPORIC IMAGINING OF AFRICAN POWER, IDENTITY, AND SUBJECTION THROUGH DRESS

“Boy: *Baba*

Man: Yes, my son

Boy: Tell me a story.

Man: (*Chuckles*) which one?

Boy: The story of home.

Man: Millions of years ago, a meteorite made of vibranium, the strongest substance in the universe, struck the continent of Africa, affecting the plant life around it. And when the time of man came, five tribes settled on it and called it Wakanda. The tribes lived in constant war with each other until a warrior shaman received a vision from the Panther Goddess Bast who led him to the Heart-shaped Herb, a plant that granted him a superhuman strength, speed, and instincts. The warrior became king and the first Black Panther, the protector of Wakanda. Four tribes agreed to live under the king’s rule but the Jabari tribe isolated themselves in the mountains. The Wakandans used vibranium to develop technology more advanced than any other nation. Nevertheless, as Wakanda thrived, the world around it descended further into chaos. To keep vibranium safe, the Wakandans vowed to hide in the plain sight, keep the truth of their power from the outside world.

Boy: And we still hide *Baba*?

Man Yes!



Boy: Why?" (Black Panther: 2018).

The vignette above is a scene from the object of my study, the film *Black Panther*, Produced by Marvel Studios, directed by Ryan Coogler and costume designed by Ruth Carter. The larger context of this conversation could be understood only in relation to the conditions of the African experience, the outlook of the continent of Africa, and the existential conditions of Black people in America. It is within this (historical) context that the film, *Black Panther*, was produced and embraced as a film that projects Africa's greatness.

Africa's story has often been told with tales of war, pestilence, disease, poverty, illiteracy, and other indices of underdevelopment. A consequence of this has been the projection of Africa as a Dark Continent in a narrative that has determined the representation of the continent, and of black people and their history, globally. In the history of cinema, the representation of Black people on screen—including stereotypical projections of Black people as lacking same mental capacity as White people—has worsened this situation. A series of films have been produced to expand this storytelling and the historization of the conditions of Africa and black people in general, with other films repeat the narratives of these stereotypical descriptions of Africa and of Black people as a backward race. The film *Birth of a Nation* reinforced the stereotypes this view, and a large number of subsequently produced films took their cue from this film's negative depiction of Black people on screen.

This negative way of addressing the continent's history is what the Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Adichie, refers to as the danger of a single story. This single story does not consider the history of Africa from the precolonial period and afterwards. It does not detail the extent of damage the twin evil of Transatlantic slavery and colonialism did to the continent and its people, the racial discrimination faced by black people in America and the woes of

neocolonial socio-economic dependence in contemporary African countries after independence. The “single” narrative of African history in books, and the (mis)representation of Black people stereotypes on screen must have informed the Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka's description of such tales, in his book *Harmattan Haze on an African Spring*, as the beholder's cataract.

After its release in 2018, the film, *Black Panther*, has sparked multifaceted global reaction with various interpretations of its thematic structure as well as the various techniques used in its production. As the first major Black superhero film of global magnitude, *Black Panther's* central composition has renewed stronger interests in the recognition of African past and its foreseeable future. Existing studies on the film *Black Panther* have not acknowledged the fantastic aesthetic display of African culture through costumes. In fact, in spite of the significance and indispensable nature of costume in film studies, the role of costume in *Black Panther* has not received adequate scholarly discussions. This is a gap in literature that I attempt to fill, with a focus on how Afrofuturism and African power and identity is expressed through costume. As a result of the aim of research, this study therefore focuses strategically on costume in the film *Black Panther*. Through the examination of aesthetic quality, functions, symbolisms, meaning and significance of the costumes, the research poses the following questions: how was the idea of Afrofuturism projected in *Black Panther*? What is the nature of power within the context of Wakanda and how is this interpreted? How is the role of a Black superhero expressed through costume? What is the broader impact of *Black Panther* costume on Black communities in the diaspora, specifically in America?

Of all visual arts in either stage or screen performance, costume is the most multi-dimensional, because it interprets the performers' actions by rendering these actions through designed outfits. In this regard, costume is designed to provide the audience with adequate visual

cues that further aid the understanding of the stage actions. Like other visual arts in performance, costume shares the same purpose of expressing the play's distinctive qualities and ideas. Hence, costume can identify the period of the events in the play; suggest the occasion, the age(s) of the character(s), occupation, as well as social and economic status. According to Dani Lyndersay in *Nigerian Dress: The Body Honoured, the costume arts of traditional Nigerian dress from early history to independence*, costume also conveys the style, mood, and the emotional tone of an individual character or all characters, as well as of the scenes.

To accomplish the above listed functions of costume in any giving production, “the costume designer thinks in terms of the 4<sup>th</sup> dimension the passage of time- not the costume *per se* but the moving and living costume” (Lyndersay 1). Hence, designing costume for any performance is a conscious activity steered by the basic elements and principles of design, the aims and objectives, in addition to the planning and organization all aimed to reveal the deliberate and unexpected images to the pleasing eyes of the audience. Thus, costume design can only be accomplished through the careful use of creative imagination fueled by information and demands in the script as indicated by the scriptwriter or playwright, the director's interpretation and concept, the visual interpretation and coordination between other artistic designers as well as the actor(s). This study however, looks beyond these seemingly-obvious functions of costume to focus on how costume was used in demonstrating Afrofuturism, power and cultural identity through different characters in the film, *Black Panther*.

This research is divided into four chapters. After this introductory chapter, the second chapter sets the research in the relevant historical context. In a brief history of black film, I address the history of film in America and the limited recognition of representation of Black actors and filmmakers. The chapter divides the era of filmmaking into three broad periods, the

first being the late 1890s-early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The second period is set within 1920s to early 1940s while the third period is between the post WWII era of the 1940s to late 1960s. I indicate how racial discrimination led to the Civil Rights Movement and other liberations efforts (including that of the Black Panther party. I address the representation and exclusion of black people from the screen at the same time that they were they being stereotyped on screen. The third chapter of begins with filmmaking from the 1970s to the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that is up till the period of 2018 when the film *Black Panther* was made. I draw connection between agitation for liberation and the concept of Afrofuturism and thus the rationale for the Afrofuturistic element of *Black Panther*. The fourth chapter of this research draws on Michel Foucault's analysis of Biopower. I describe how power, as a regime of truth, operates in the Wakanda of *Black Panther*. Chapter four also serves as the avenue for exploring how the film's costume projects power in the way that Foucault reinterpreted power. I address how costume depicted the individual characters in *Black Panther* and how it helped to express cultural identity in the film.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FROM “JAZZMANIA” TO *GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER*:

#### Black Film History, Costume and Afrofuturistic Representation

##### 2.1 Overview

In this chapter, I examine the representations of African Americans on the silver screen since the emergence of movies by or about African Americans in America. In the narrative, I address the role of Afrofuturistic representations in the reimagining of black life and aspirations against a background of misrepresentation that began with the film *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. I note, and wherever possible I discuss, the role of costume in Afrofuturistic representation. Two films bookend my narrative, namely *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* (1932) and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967). With *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* as a frame of reference, I address the representation of black people in film from the Silent Film era to the introduction of sound films (i.e. from about 1912 to the early 1920s). I note, that the racist representation of black people in American society is sustained with a form of power best described by Foucault’s idea of Biopower—this is a power associated with notions about the survival of society—invariably, leads to a regime of truth, in which ideas considered necessary for the society’s survival are woven into the fabric of the society. Racism and its manifest form in racist stereotypes had become engraved in the very threads of American society through the cultivation of white supremacist’s cultural ideal.

I continue another section with films up to the World War II period (1920s-1940s). I discuss two categories of Black films that emerged in the representation –Race film (represented by the creativity and industry of black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux) and Black-oriented film. I

close the chapter with section focused on the period after World War II up to the closing stages of the Civil Rights Movement (1945-1969) and with *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* as an important frame of reference. Overall, I suggest that the story of black people in American film is a story about struggle for representation in which black people have made Afrofuturistic gestures by (re)considering their past to imagine utopian futures. I identify costume design as a crucial element in such gestures.

## 2.2. Prefiguring Afrofuturistic Costume: *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue* and Jim Crow America

In 1932, two white men, screenwriter Phil Cohan and film director Aubrey Scotto, collaborated on a 10-minute short film, meant to be shown in US cinemas as a sort of prelude to the main feature. The film, *Rhapsody in Black and Blue*, begins with the shot of a phonograph playing a record of Louis Armstrong's "St. Louis Blues." An African-American man is scat-singing along with the music, while enthusiastically banging his drumsticks on a chair, washtub and other nearby items. His noise and his indolence annoy his wife who intervenes by asking him to take his "ear from out the jazz box" and "mop around the house." She returns to catch him by the record and conks him unconscious with a mop. In his unconscious reverie he finds himself in a kingdom called "Jazzmania" where he is king and can command any wish he desires. He requests a rendition of the song "Shine" by Armstrong and his Orchestra who appear on a highly stylized set, up to their ankles in a sea of soap bubbles. Later the man regains consciousness with his wife behind him and the phonograph needle skipping on the label. He smashes a vase over his head in an attempt to return to Jazzmania but his wife hits him on the head with a frying pan to end the film. Critics charged the film with reinforcing white-supremacist stereotypes of black people but recognized its subversion of stereotypes through embodied expression. Costume was

central to this double gesture (reinforcement-subversion), by helping to evoke a surreal utopian fantasy that placed Africans both through and beyond the representations of stereotypes.

The stereotypes with which *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* was charged are racial-cultural ones rooted in slavery. Slavery had its motivation in, among other things, commerce. Protecting the wealth of white Southern plantation owners by ensuring their access to “a new source of manpower,” was as a basis for capturing large numbers of black people from Africa and selling them to work on plantations in America (Rugg, *A History of American Civilization*, 93). Owning a slave was a legal act in America and various states claimed a right to protect this commercial “property.” By framing black people as chattel, as owned things, and so an improvement on their former heathenistic and primitive circumstances in Africa, slavers legitimated the subjugation of black lives as charitable redemption of a depraved “heathen” African soul (Taiwo 28). As such assertions gained popular acceptance they fueled racial prejudice against black people. By the 19th Century, an ideology focused on dehumanizing black people pertained in America. It held that black culture and identity were inferior to that of white people and, among other things, cast Africa as stuck in primitivism and therefore lacking history or any real contributions to American or other achievements. British historian Arnold Toynbee claimed that of all races only black people “had made no productive contribution to civilization” (King, Davis and Brown 367-368). American historians David Muzzey, U.B. Phillips, Hilary Herbert and Claude Bowers echoed such ideas (368). The ideas were implicit in the school curricula that eliminated black people’s contributions (Dagbovie 35) and explicit in Jim Crow segregation of black people in the social space (Meier and E Rudwick 248). The hatred and fear they inflamed continued to haunt African Americans after Emancipation up through the 1930s, especially in the plantation south. We find at work here Foucault’s notion of Biopower – this is a power associated with notions about the

survival of society—invariably, leads to a regime of truth, in which ideas considered necessary for the society’s survival are woven into the fabric of the society (Foucault 142). In the Jim Crow South, racism and its manifest form in racist stereotypes had become engraved in the very threads of American society through the cultivation of white supremacist cultural ideals.

Primarily through costume (and through props) *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* adopted some of the representations long used to uphold white supremacy, such as those that cast Africa as locked in primitivism. In Jazzmania, the king’s guards and attendants are bare-chested, in little more than loin cloths, and wielding feathered-fans (in the case of attendants) and spears and battle-axes (in the case of the guards). Armstrong himself appears on the stage in an animal fur pantaloons and a leopard skin coat over his bare chest. He and his band are attired as, what Bruce Raeburn calls “African tribesmen” in “absurd jungle costumes” and describes as one of the “racist trappings” of the film (67). In Robert O’ Meally’s words, Armstrong was “costumed as a grotesque caricature of an African native” (298). Moviegoers were familiar with the associations of Africa with primitivism through dress in *Rhapsody in Blue*, for they were common in films of the day like *Tarzan the Ape Man* and *Trader Horn* (both released in 1932 like *Rhapsody in Black and Blue*). Both films cast Africa as a ‘dark continent’ with wild savages or docile primitives in jungles, not intelligent people in complex sophisticated societies and, by implication, African Americans as a people redeemed by slavery from this savagery, primitivism and darkness.

In addition to using stereotypes of the life of African people before slavery, *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* employed race “demeaning stereotypes” that had emerged after slavery and were common to movies of the day.” One way that racist ideology sought to dehumanize and demolish Black people’s history was to ignore the realism of Black lives in representation. In 1915, D.W. Griffith had adapted Thomas Dixon’s account of the Old South, Civil War and Reconstruction



era in his book *The Clansman* into a controversial film, *The Birth of a Nation*. Dixon presented black people in his book as “wild, sex-starved beast,” vilified them, and validated the Ku Klux Klan as a deliverer of Southern Whites plagued by black “savages.” Griffiths adaptation is also set in the 19th Century as abolitionists demand freedom for enslaved Africans and portrays black people (using white actors in blackface) as drunken, uneducated, irrational and sexual predators. A 1929 film *Hearts in Dixie* used a “coon” stereotype, in the character of Gummy, a “languid, shiftless husband whose ‘mysery’ in his feet” keeps him from any work is concerned, yet he can “shuffle” like a “jumping jack” once he is “away” from his wife’s eye (Leab 86). The coon, emerged in Jim Crow to depict black males as “good-for-nothing”, “lazy”, “slow”, “trifling”, uncivilized illiterate buffoons and “developed into the most blatantly degrading of all black stereotypes” (Bogle 8). These stereotypes populated American visual and popular culture.

*Rhapsody in Black and Blue* used the stereotype of the Coon for the husband character. Stereotypically, a married coon’s wife dominated him but in this film the wife also represented another stereotype, a “Mammy figure.” The Mammy was usually a rotund black woman in a long black dress, an apron, and a head tie, and only good enough to serve as domestic help in white households. From the 1800s through mid-1900s, black women were often portrayed in popular culture as “Sassy Mammies” who ran their own homes with iron fists, including berating their black husbands and children. The costume of the wife in *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* is a stripped-down Mammy dress that retains only the long dress and apron typical of clothing for domestic work. Otherwise, she is every bit a sassy mammy. Basically, these images, according to “were... filmic reproductions of Black stereotypes that had existed since the days of slavery and were already popularized in American life and arts” (Bogle 4). In *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* Armstrong’s bandsmen wore striped pants associated with minstrel show. In minstrelsy on stage

and film white actors caricatured how black people looked and behaved by creating a deformed monstrous image of the black body. They did so by grotesquely painting their faces black, with red or white lip paints that make the mouth look oversized with big popping eye balls and white teeth. The characters were subservient: butlers, servants, maids, never masters, mistresses, landowners. Black actors compelled by economic necessity and demands of white audiences later put on the make-up to perform the caricature.

Armstrong himself, faced criticism for a style of acting and affect in the film, deemed too minstrel-like for comfort. The song he sings in the film has been described as a “plantation song,” that celebrates images of an Old South whose joys are largely mythical for the African American population. However, *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* has been described, not only as reproducing some of these stereotypical representations of black people that were circulating in its day but also transcending them. One of the ways the film has been seen to do this is in the musical virtuosity and personal magnetism of the maestro Armstrong himself. John Wilkins observes that while his acting and affect are all minstrel show, “when he blows that trumpet you feel the presence of another soul, a different way of being, a way forward...as if he was speaking two competing languages that had nothing in common (2016). When he points to his leopard cloth while singing, “I wear the latest styles” he confronts the stereotype of the African as frozen in time. Similarly, Gary Giddins insists that Armstrong subverted the demeaning stereotypes that the film thrust on him—“when the director/writer is trying to tell the audience one thing, Armstrong is telling it something entirely different”(9)—he transcended “racist trappings” with the magnificence of his music, his physical muscularity, carriage,” and “boding sexuality” that made him a hero among black people in the 1930s. Giddins suggests, essentially, that ‘Armstrong’s musical virtuosity and personal magnetism allowed him to mount a heroic

subversion of the stereotypical framings into which the actors had been put: a kind of agency under constraint.

The transcendence of *Rhapsody in Black and Blue* over its embedded stereotypes has also been attributed to its surreal-utopian fantasy. Describing the mythical kingdom, Jazzmania, into which the husband is transported in the film Jeremy Lane writes that “it appears to be a literally utopian space, somewhere outside of the recognizable coordinates of space and time, whose inhabitants sport a mix of identifiable black costumes drawn from an incommensurable variety of places and periods.” Lane notes apart from Armstrong’s leopard skins and his bands striped trousers the king for example, “is dressed in the French-looking uniform ... reminiscent of a black historical hero such as Toussaint L’Ouverture of Haiti” He suggests that this utopia is “some kind of trans-historical, transnational black space (83). Casey Hayman maintains that while Armstrong’s leopard cloth evokes stereotypes of the premodern African he also wears a V-shaped glittering neckpiece that evokes early imaginings of space travelers in the Buck Rogers comic strips of the 1920s and 1930s (135). He suggests that this “hint of futurism” alongside the glittering pillars and rays of light that emanate from the backdrop in the utopian palace at Jazzmania, modify any simply stereotypical readings of Armstrong’s role in the film.

Utopian performances, Jill Dolan theorizes, are the kind that provide “a place where people come together, embodied ... to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world” (2). In *Rhapsody in Black and Blue*, the surreal-fantastic kingdom of Jazzmania offers such a space. Against the constraints of a deeply white-supremacist world and its plethora of established stereotypes, Jazzmania serves as an imaginary space under whose umbrage African American viewers could gather and imagine a better world of possibilities outside the strictures of Jim Crow segregation and representations. It

is not farfetched to think of Jazzmania, with its hints of futurism, as a space reclaimable for Afro-futuristic reimaginings of the black experience: one that confounds conventional ideas of time and space to bring the stereotypic representation of African peoples outside time under scrutiny and question. I shall speak about Afrofuturism at greater length in subsequent chapters. But, for the moment if we are to understand Afro-futurism as a concept that exceeds science fiction—if we are to think of it as fundamentally an imagining (even utopian) that reflects, inflects, and/or inverses our sense of the past to help us capture intimations, however fleeting, of a future better world then we might consider much of black self-representation as Afro-futuristic gestures, and costuming, as an art and craft at the very heart of such imagining.

### 2.3. Affirming Blackness? Race and Black-Oriented Film in the Shadow of *Birth of a Nation*

*Rhapsody in Black and Blue* may have offered African American viewers something for an Afrofuturistic (re)imagining of their pasts and futures. Nevertheless, it was, fundamentally, a Hollywood commercial film and something different from another development that began about the same time as Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*: The Black Independent Film movement. Films of the movement focused "on Black community and [were] written, directed, produced and distributed by" people with "ancestral link to Black Africa" (Reid 2). Black independent films plead the cause of African Americans. They were 'race films' that explored stories and narrative about real life experiences of Black people. Pioneers of 'race films' include Noble P. Johnson (a Black actor) and his brother George Johnson, founders of The Lincoln Motion Picture Company in 1916. In 1918, Emmett J. Scott, a former secretary of Booker T. Washington responded to the distorted images of black people in Griffith's *Birth of the Nation* by producing *The Birth of a Race*. He faced financial, technical and artistic challenges in the production but "inspired Black

filmmakers to challenge anti-black bias that permeated all levels of America's ascendant motion picture industry" (Lawrence 4). It became the most critical black film in response to the racial prejudice that *The Birth of a Nation* represented. An important result of Scott's inspiration was the development of the black independent film movement. To fully grasp what it challenged, it is worth returning, momentarily, to look at *The Birth of a Nation*.

As Bogle observes, that in *The Birth of the Nation* "the Klan was an impressive piece of film propaganda...so stirring that audiences screamed in delight, cheering for white heroes and booing, hissing and cursing black villains" (10). The film misrepresented black people through stereotypes of black illiteracy, inferiority and irrationality, including an Uncle Tom who staunchly defends his white master's family from rebels. This stereotype is rooted in the title character of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*" but Griffith grossly distorted it into a character "objectionable to African Americans": a "whose English is poor" and "who will sell out any black man if it will curry the favor" of a white employer, master, or mistress. (Turner, NPR 2008). By depicting slaves dancing and clowning in their quarters, Griffith also propagated the myth of slave contentment and of slavery as a means of elevating the Negro from "his bestial instinct" (Bogle 10). Two other stereotypes were "Griffith's most disturbing archetypal figures": "brutes" or angry nameless characters who attack the white master's faithful servant and assault white men of the town, and the "brutal black bucks" who are savage/barbaric, physically violent, oversexed, violent and frenzied in lust for White flesh." *Birth of a Nation* set a white supremacist ideological "standard" for representing black people and ignited protest from black communities, scholars and the newly formed National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and other civil right organizations.

Basically, the motion picture industry did not spare black people the inhumane attributes that they suffered in representation. Rather, it perpetuated and condoned them. Berry and Berry suggest that “...when considering the volatile racial climate of those times, even if Hollywood had wanted to make films with more progressive depictions of African Americans, the theatres showing such films would have probably been burned to the ground” (Berry and Berry 2). Such attempt at exclusion was systemic: racism in the movie industry reflected the larger society and its refusal to see black people for their full humanity and historical accomplishments. Federal and State governments’ policies favored the status quo. Thus, as it did slavery, law—especially in the South—backed anti-black prejudice and attendant racist depictions and white supremacist organizations. This gave impetus to racial violence that rocked many parts of the South for more than the first half of the 20th century—involving mob attacks and lynching of black people—such as the 1919 Red Summer that led to mass exodus of Blacks from the South to Northern part of America (Jacqueline Goldsby 14). Furthermore, Jim Crow policies justified segregations in schools and other public places and helped to further the cause of racism.

By the 1920s dozens of Black independent film companies producing race films had sprung up. Among them, Oscar Devereaux Micheaux emerged as the most popular director and producer of the movement and the first major black motion picture filmmaker. Micheaux tackled politically controversial subjects, including race issues like miscegenation, passing and lynching. After making *The Homestead* (1917) his 1920 film, *Within Our Gates*, was a great success. It portrayed race in early 20th Century America, addressing issues related to Jim Crow, the revival of the Ku Klux Klan, and the Great Migration of black people from the South to Northern cities due to racial discrimination. Jane Gaines considers the argument that “race movies gave expression to the utopian aspirations of their black audiences” (145). She notes that in Micheaux

films like *Body and Soul* (1925) and *God's Stepchildren* (1938) he dramatizes the social realities (including ills and pathologies) of black life. However, altogether, he propounds a utopian “uplift ideology” in which leading members of the race stand as examples and are to be entrusted with the administration of social advancement (one is reminded, here, of DuBois’ talented tenth), and in which the solution for all social ills lie in marriage and family (144). Thus, in a more broadly conceived sense of the Afrotuturism, Oscar Micheaux found the radically re-imagining of the black past and the conception of a better future as necessarily mutually inclusive. It is double consciousness in a sense slightly different from how DuBois conceived it—an outlook that is always and at the same time looking at the past as it looks at the future

By the time of the Great Depression, producers of the black independent films struggled to find sufficient financial support for quality films. The introduction of sound technology in film worsened this struggle. The “1927 release of *The Jazz Singer* confirmed the economic and technological viability of sound-picture synchronization and all the major studios went after the new technology” (Rhines 31). Also striking about *Jazz Signer* is the fact that it featured black face performed by a white actor. The new technology created novel audience expectations that translated to additional cost challenge for independent black filmmakers. Also, black filmmakers faced the reality of the social issues—including segregation—that their films projected. Few movie theatres in the United States were interested in exhibiting black-made films. Independent Black films could only be exhibited at black owned theatres and make-shift screening venues across the country. Oscar Micheaux found a way to continue making films during this period. In 1928, he filed for bankruptcy, resulting from “faulty distribution systems, censorship rulings, print costs, high cost of sound technology, and the centralized management of Harlem theatres” (Rehines 31). However, in late 1929, Micheaux embraced an alliance with White Harlem theatre

owners Leo Brecher and Frank Schiffman. This provided him the opportunity to continue making films and resulted in his first sound feature film *The Exile* in 1931.

The challenges allowed better-funded and better circulated Hollywood films to compete with the Independent Black films among Black audiences. “By the end of the ‘20s, Hollywood had already begun to incorporate elements of Black culture into highly polished productions such as *Hallelujah!* (1929) and *Hearts in Dixie* (1929), further siphoning off Black filmmakers’ potential audience” (Snead 370). I shall refer to these films produced by White films producers, screenwriters, and directors as Black-oriented films. Unlike the Hollywood studio-financed “Black-oriented” films, Micheaux’s works reiterated topics that he felt the Black-oriented film should address but omitted. He continued to make films that explored controversial Black-related topics demonstrated that Black director could make films that portray the normal human, strong positive qualities of the Black race. Micheaux’s *Daughter of the Congo* (1930) for instance, was an African adventure story about a Black cavalry officer determined to rescue a young rich Black girl lost in the dangerously unsafe tropical location. Micheaux continued to tell stories centered on real life issues that affect the Black race and by 1948, had made about sixteen sound films. However, the inevitable result of the Black-oriented films was the extinction of the Independent Black film movement. White-owned commercial and profit driven film companies in Hollywood took advantage of the decline and gained control of the Black film industry.

Producers of the Black-Oriented Films hired regular black actors like Steppin’ Fetchit and Hattie McDaniel. Additionally, their films incorporated what seemed like Black lived experiences in the narratives and infused entertaining Black music, singing, and dancing into the production, attracting Black audiences more than the financial and technically challenged Independent Black films of the era. Unfortunately, despite Hollywood’s use of Black actors,



seeming depiction of Black life, and infusion of Black expressive culture in the Black-oriented films, some of these films such as the earlier-mentioned *Hearts in Dixie* and *Hallelujah* remained ill-informed, even if believable. In a review by a Los Angeles critic Louella Parsons and cited by Lawrence, *Hearts in Dixie* is “a remarkable talking picture in which one glimpses the real soul of the Negro.... [There is] nothing in *Hearts in Dixie* ... at which any race can take offense, it is a true and sympathetic picture of the colored folk” (8). To others, such a comment demonstrated the establishments’ approval of Hollywood’s ill-formed stereotype images of blacks and white writers/directors’ continued misrepresentations of African Americans on the silver scene.

Thus, the end of the Great Depression, around 1939-1940, ushered in a new era of American film and of black people on the silver screen. Citing Peter Noble’s remark about *Hearts in Dixie*, Lawrence notes that there was nothing new in the representation of black bodies in these films. Noble says, “we were given no new slant on Negro life and thought, just the same old hackneyed routine. The story was so slight as to be almost nonexistent, but apparently we were to be compensated for this by a session of endless musical numbers, spirituals, prayer meetings, cotton picking and the like” (Lawrence 8). The images of black people in the films were that of laborers dressed in rags, living in tatters and wearing grotesque makeup, working tirelessly from sunrise to sunset to please the White master. Black experience was filtered through the prejudicial lenses of a White storyteller who sought to portray black people in *Hearts in Dixie* as mindlessly contented race. The films retained the traditional racist stereotypes by depicting the supposed “shucking” and “jiving” black lifestyle. The offensive misrepresentations of black life, black character and black beliefs in *Hearts in Dixie* exemplified the continued marginalization and demonization of the Black race in America.

Hattie McDaniel was nominated and won Oscar for Best Actress in a Supporting Role in 1939—the first black woman to be so recognized—but it was for her role in *Gone with the Wind* as Mammy, the classic stereotype of the African American women. Stereotyped on screen as a domestic worker, Hattie’s character left little room for creative costuming because her wardrobe was marked by a house dress, an apron, and a headscarf. Clearly, the idea that Blacks could play only certain specific roles was still entrenched. As a consequence, it was difficult to ensure the versatility of roles by Black people. The role of the stereotypical villain, servant and jester remained but with little tweaks—Black people were portrayed as lively singers, dancers and entertainers but with the same fixed roles. Still, it provided black performers a platform for to demonstrate a unique and dazzling singing and dancing skills to their best advantage. This became so popular that rather than featuring black character/s in the regular plot and stopping in the middle of a scene to have him/her sing, Hollywood producers created uninterrupted musical interludes and entire scenes dedicated to musical performances by the entertainer in the film. It was so successful every big broadcast, Broadway show or hit parade had Black personalities (Donald 107). Pianist-singer Hazel Scott distinguished herself as an entertainer. Lena Horne, was considered “1940s’ biggest Negro attraction” for her remarkable talent as a “pianist and a sultry song stylist” (Donald 109, 112). Others included Ethel Waters, Eddie Anderson, Fats Waller, and Nicholas brothers Harold and Fayard (deemed the greatest dance team because of their stylized acrobatic moves) to mention a few. Unfortunately, the musical scenes could exist independent of the rest of film plot so, in the event of a theatre owner’s objection to a Black entertainer’s scenes, they could be expunged with minimal impact on the storyline and message (Donald 109). In the result the entire innovation provided another way for Hollywood to promote White conservative prejudices that stifled Black talent in spite of the conspicuous ingenuity of Black entertainers.

## 2.4 New Stereotypes: Poitier and the Bespoke Suit of Impeccable Blackness

In 1967, African American actor and Oscar-laureate Sidney Poitier starred in the film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. In the film John Prentice (Poitier) and African American medical doctor, is engaged to a young white woman, Joanna (Katharine Houghton) from a wealthy family. Joanna confesses to John that despite her assurances to the contrary, she is worried about her parent's—the Draytons'—reaction to their marriage plans. John tells Joanna's parents that if they cannot approve of the marriage completely, he will call off the engagement. John's parents are invited to dinner, during which the prospective mothers in law approve of the marriage but their husbands maintain its impracticality. The climax of the film is when Matt Drayton declares his approves of the marriage on the basis that "love conquers all." *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* followed a long history of anti-miscegenation in American society, deeply rooted in the history of slavery in which interracial relationships were perceived to muddy the separation of white and black people. Even at the time of the film, many Americans still opposed interracial marriages. In that vein the film's "unabashedly positive picture of interracial marriage" (including the first kiss, howbeit a chaste and modest one, between a black and white couple in a major Hollywood film) made it rather forward looking—progressive, if you will. It nevertheless rode on currents of change that intensified as far back the 1940s.

The end of World War II in late 1940s had marked a turning point for African Americans generally, both in job opportunities and in representation of Black people on silver screen because of worldwide structural change caused by the war. According to Algeron Jesse Rhines in *Black Film, White money*, "after the World War II, global and domestic reaction to Adolf Hitler's racist campaigns and destruction of Europe's colonial empire allowed the [film industry] to bring Blacks out of the pastoral South and into the modern world" (36). With all eyes on America after

the return of Black soldiers who ironically fought anti-Semitism during World War II, there was a shift in how White people perceived and treated Black people at the time. The postwar anti-racist struggle in America could not have succeeded without the joint efforts of returning African American soldiers, the leadership interventions of race leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil right movements that called attention to specific inequalities in the system. And external pressures from international communities who criticized the US for fighting “European colonialism abroad while maintaining colonial domination of Blacks domestically”. The United Nations, for instance, undertook a worldwide campaign against racial discrimination, including segregation laws, in its human right and fundamental freedoms article.

The pressures Rhines say, “encouraged high-ranking Whites to acquiesce to many of the movement’s demands” (36). As such, there were several official changes in American racial policy. For instance, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Executive Order 8802. This order was meant to end all forms of discrimination because of race, creed, or national origin, in the employment of workers in defense industries or Government and provided equal opportunities for all workers in the defense industries (Rhines 1996). Changes in American racial policy continued in the postwar period even after the demise of President Roosevelt in 1945. In the famous 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (Kansas)* case, the United States Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. This overturned the 1896 “separate but equal” ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which had allowed Jim Crow Laws that mandated separate public facilities for Whites and African Americans to prevail throughout the South during the first half of the 20th century. While the *Brown* ruling applied specifically to schools, it implied that segregation in other public facilities was unconstitutional as well. In 1955, a year after the *Brown* ruling, the young Alabama local pastor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr

emerged on the national scene in the Montgomery bus boycott after Rosa Parks, an African American woman, was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a public bus to a White passenger. King led the resulting protest against segregation, which was so successful in spite of threats, attacks and arrests that the Supreme Court ruled that the segregation of bus seating was unconstitutional. By December 20, 1956, a federal decision in that regard had gone into effect.

The above and other postwar race issue were prevalent themes in a group of motion pictures between the early 1940s and the late 1950s, commonly known as “social problem films” (Lawrence 12). In Lawrence’s view, Hollywood embraced social problem film for two related reasons. He asserts that “first, after fighting anti-Semitism during WW II, many soldiers returned home feeling that if racial inequality was unjust overseas, then it was unfair in the United States as well. Secondly, Hollywood turned to the production of social problem film in order to profit from America’s newfound consciousness” (Lawrence 12). Nevertheless, the topics of the films extended beyond the critique of race relations in America, it covered a range of problematic situations. This type of film deals explicitly with social, sexual and political problems and their solution. The typical problem-film shows how an individual or group is best by the problem, weaves a plot around the causes and consequences of the problem, describes the moral or ethical issues-and dilemmas- raised both by the problem and by possible solutions, and finally ends with the hero taking appropriate action, usually including a morally difficult choice, which solves the problem, at least for him and his loved ones (Herbert Gans 327). The point here is that problem films provided a way for the character(s) to shine healing light on recognizable America’s ailing problems of race prejudice, bigotry, and miscegenation.

Hollywood’s classical pioneering Problem Films included Stanley Kramer’s *Home of the Brave* (1949), adapted from a stage play by Arthur Laurent, focused on a Black soldier who

returned home paralyzed from a mission on a Japanese-held island with no sign of any physical trauma. The film reveals that the Black soldier's problem is not only psychological but also universal (Berry & Berry 11). When released, the film was rated as "solid commercial and critical success and ... a Hollywood breakthrough in the presentation of racial discrimination as central theme" (Bogle 130). *Time Magazine*, Bogle notes, wrote that the film "...has novelty, emotional wallop, and excitement that come from wrestling with a real problem, rather than fencing with a cooked-up plot... Even when it fumbles the statement of its message, the movies retain a sort of rough-and-ready strength" (Bogle 131). Louis de Rochemont's *Lost Boundaries* (1949), another Problem Film, is based on a true story in which a prominent doctor and family live happily in an all-White neighborhood, until it is discovered that they are not White. *Lost Boundaries* received glowing comments from *Time magazine*, which called the movie "a first-class social document, but also a profoundly moving film" (Bogle 133). The *New York Times* reporter Bosley Crowther observed that "one of the many bitter aspects of racism in our land—the-in-between isolation of the Negro who tries to pass as White—is exposed with extraordinary courage, understanding and dramatic power" in the film, and that whether viewed "as emotional entertainment, as social enlightenment, or both, it is one of the most effective pictures that we are likely to have this year" (Bogle 133).

Other Problem Films of the time include *Pinky* a 1949 Twentieth Century-Fox Corporation film directed by Elia Kazan and produced by Darryl Zanuck. It explores the world of a mulatto who leaves home in search of a better life and forsakes her loving grandmother to pass for a White girl. Ethel Waters, who had been around since the 1920s in films like *On with the Show* (1929) and *Rufus Jones for President* (1930), played the character Pinky's grandmother Mrs. Dicey Johnson in the film, and was nominated for Best Actress in a Supporting Role.

Waters thus became the second black woman to be so recognized. Unfortunately, *Pinky* met with conflicting reviews. A *Newsweek* review applauded that “Elia Kazan... does an admirable job of *Pinky*’s personal history.” *Pinky* was a box office success, Lawrence, citing Daniel Leab (1975), observes that “*Pinky* doubled the success of its predecessor... and estimated to be the second-highest-grossing film of 1949” (Lawrence 15). By the end of the day, the success account of *Pinky* and *Home of the Brave* encouraged the influx of more social problem films that not only entertain but most importantly address social, political and economic topics as it affects the people. However even *Pinky* did not escape criticisms of misrepresentation of Black experience.

By this point, the social issues of the 1950’s that I highlighted earlier in the chapter were not the driving force of the film industry. Like many aspects of America life Hollywood had to undergo its own share of change during this era. The introduction of Television into American homes posed an unprecedented challenge to the once financially vibrant motion picture industry as box office attendance for movies dropped. To save the situation and win its audience interest back to the movie theatre away from television, Hollywood introduced new technology: the use of massive “wide screens-Cinerama, CinemaScope, VistaVision, 3-D,” and ... picked up bold themes [and aimed at ‘realistic’ reflections] of growing chaos in the streets of America and in the psyches of its citizen” (Bogle 144). At the same time Hollywood responded to the cry for fair, equal representation of Black people on the screens, especially when African American men were shipping off to fight for freedom in foreign wars while racism threatened their existence in America. This period also witnessed Hollywood productions of biographical movies about Black personalities. Such films made during this period include the stories of Black sport heroes like *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950), and *The Joe Lewis Story* (1954). The period equally presented stories of Black schoolteachers that stress the importance of education in *Bright Road* (1953).

This change in Hollywood provided a long-awaited opportunity for Black audiences to experience not just mere entertainment but also commentaries on Black experience, portrayed by actors who played the roles in such a believable manner that it affected the imagination of the audience. In 1958 Juanita Moore received a Best Actress in a Supporting Role Oscar nomination for playing Annie Johnson in the film *Imitation of Life*. However, three main names stood out in this post-World war II era. Dorothy Dandridge became the first black woman to receive the Oscar nomination for Best Actress (but fourth nomination of a black woman) for *Carmen Jones* (1950). She didn't win but her character was very empowering to black women. In *Carmen Jones* the titular character is a factory worker who, outside her blue-collar job wears a curve-hugging red pencil skirt and black off-the-shoulder top that later became a fashion signature of the period. Ivey Christie Shelby submits that this was significant because the audiences saw something different from the stereotyped costumes of a black character. They saw a black woman portrayed outside of a domestic role as the epitome of glamour: she dressed in luxe fur coats, dresses cinched at the waist, and gold hoops. Clearly as the narratives about blackness changed, the need for costumes also changed to ensure that the narrative is properly told.

In 1958 Sidney Poitier was nominated for and won an Oscar for his role in the film *The Defiant Ones*. Although it was a fifth Oscar nomination to a black person it was the first for Best Actor. In 1961 he won the Best Actor Oscar nomination for his role in *Lilies of the Field*, becoming the first black man to win this award. Poitier later had to his credit socially sensitive films like *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) with which I began this section. Bogle describes Poitier as a “paragon of Black middle-class values and virtues” (158). Unlike other black actors of his time, he typically played educated, intelligent characters who spoke impeccable English, were well dressed and displayed



impressive table manners (Bogle 2017). Such qualities made him an admirable personality among both White and Black audiences and a far cry from the stereotypical images that *Birth of a Nation* had deployed. As Bill Cosby notes in his 1968 narration of the documentary film, *Black History, Lost Stolen and Strayed*, “mostly black actors are not playing old stereotypes anymore.” He says, however, that “they are now playing new stereotypes” and singles out Sidney Poitier characters for “always helping some little old lady across the street whether they wanted to cross or not.” He adds that black people in America had a “bum deal” so “it won’t hurt much if we see a little bit [of the extraordinarily decent black character] now and then. Bill Cosby’s observation is instructive as it puts the Poitier characters’ admirable personalities in historical context.

As the first Hollywood film to portray an interracial romance with an optimistic ending, at *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* a glimpse of a utopian America in which character trumped color in the measure of a person. The film was so out of place at the time that the marketers did not believe it would be a success, according to director Kramer, who is quoted by McGillicuddy as saying “Columbia doesn’t know to this day that we shot only half days. They didn’t believe the film would be a commercial success anyway, and if they’d known our schedule they would have been doubly furious”. Given the racial context of its day, we can think of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* as a utopian imagining that reflects, but also inflects and even inverts our picture of the past to picture of a future better world of racial relations, what Keith Harris calls “utopian fantasies of integration” (60). The film promised that the younger generation will hold to the ideals that have lapsed” by claiming “the utopia of our [America’s] national rhetoric rather than the messier reality of our country’s history (Brenan 94). In this, Poitier’s character served as an idealized Afrofuturistic counter-*Birth of a Nation*. He “had the self-containment of a cat, swoop of a hawk, calm of a saint. His poise was a form of precision, and ... intelligence that ran deep.

He was ... the gentleman hero in the bespoke suit (Jacobs).” In the late 1960s activists of the civil rights movement were harnessing the power of fashion: “Men wore a uniform of starched white shirts, dark suits and slim ties” (Givhan). Donning similar wear Sidney Poitier, as John Prentice, cut the picture of utopian impeccability and Afrofuturistic heroism.

As Black artistes increasingly scored high recognition in the motion picture industry, the political atmosphere in the country grew more tense. The Civil Rights Movement convinced President Dwight D. Eisenhower to sign the long-contested Voting Rights Act into law, his action resulted in “resistance and open hostility to Blacks exercising their right to vote” (Berry and Berry 13). This generated anger and counter-resistance from the parts of the African American community that, at this time, were no longer interested in placidly pleading for their acceptance as equal legitimate citizens of the United States of America. These communities of Black people were ready to resist all forms of racially discriminatory treatment with “bold and assertive tactics being stressed by oncoming Black Power Movement” (Berry and Berry 13). Bogle describes this period as “an era of great change, the beginning of a transition period of which we have yet to see the end, [that] started with sit-ins, boycotts, and marches, and ended in riots” (Bogle 178). Inevitably, the films reflected the realities of the time. As the era unveiled a new horizon and sociopolitical awareness for African Americans, hence, new images burst on the big screen that attempted to change the course of the film industry. In forms of Afrofuturistic expression African American continued to imagine utopian futures in film by reflecting (on) and/or reconfiguring the past understand Afro-futurism including science fiction. Costume, as an art and craft, remained at the very heart of such creative, Afrofuturistic, utopian imaginings.

## CHAPTER THREE

### BLACK PANTHER AND AFROFUTURISM

#### 3.1 Overview

As seen in Chapter Two, the story of black film has been that of a struggle for proper representation—against misrepresentation. African Americans struggled against disempowering stereotypes/misrepresentations and omissions by which a white supremacist America worked at subjugating black identity in America. I addressed the role of Afrofuturistic representations in the reimagining of black life and aspirations against a background of misrepresentation that began with the film *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. I addressed the representation of black people in film from the Silent Film era to the introduction of sound films. I noted, that the racist representation of black people in American society is sustained with a form of power best described by Foucault's idea of Biopower—this is a power associated with notions about the survival of society—invariably, leads to a regime of truth, in which ideas considered necessary for the society's survival are woven into the fabric of the society. Racism and its manifest form in racist stereotypes had become engraved in the very threads of American society through the cultivation of white e supremacist cultural ideal. I discussed two categories of Black films that emerged in the representation –Race film and Black-oriented film. I closed the chapter with a discussion of film in the post war period. I suggested that the story of black people in American film involved their effort at afro futuristic gestures to reconsider their past and imagine utopian futures. I identified costume designs as a crucial element in such gestures.

I continue another section with films up to the World War II period (1920s-1940s). I close the chapter with section focused on the period after World War II up to the closing stages of the Civil Rights Movement (1945-1969) and with *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* as an important frame of reference. Overall, I suggest that the story of black people in American film

is a story about struggle for representation in which black people have made Afrofuturistic gestures by (re)considering their past to imagine utopian futures. I identify costume design as a crucial element in such gestures.

This chapter looks at *Black Panther* (2018), produced by Marvel Studios and directed by Ryan Coogler, and explains what about the production that made it such a landmark affair in the story of black film and of African American representation. I'll begin by locating *Black Panther* historically in a post-civil-right, contemporary (1970 to date) era of black films when African Americans had made significant strides towards their inclusion and representation in American film but, in certain respects, remained on the margins. I will then describe the plot of *Black Panther* film and examine audience's reception of the film, with a focus on the feelings it generated among African Americans about their identity and its move away from the years of subjection of black representation to the constructions of a predominately White industry. Finally, I will discuss the concept of Afrofuturism as a principal way in which *Black Panther*, by presenting an imagined, glorious, African future, worked at generating an empowering sense of black self-hood/identity away from the past subjections in America's racial history.

### 3.2 The Contemporary Films (1970 to Date)

The 1970s saw an increase of the presence of African American actors in American motion picture. In the 1950s and 1960s The Civil Rights Movement had demanded, fought for, and won an appreciable amount of integration and inclusiveness in American social life. The mainstream Oscar recognitions of Waters, Moore, Dandridge, provided an added inspiration to black actors and very likely contributed to the increased representation of black people on screen during the 1970s. Sun Ra's 1974 *Space is the Place* was an audacious Afrofuturist attempt. In the

film, Sun Ra who is a jazz composer and musician starred along with his band members in the film. In the he agrees to play a game of cards against a devil-like antagonist to win for the black people. His aim was to relocate the black community to a planet newly discovered by himself during one of his journeys to space – the planet he hopes will become a new home populated by only black people.

However, the 1970s also saw black people in the Director's Chair. Sidney Poitier made three films: *Buck and the Preacher*, a 1972 comedy western that defied the tradition of Hollywood westerns by making black characters central to the story; *Uptown Saturday Night* (1974); and *Let's Do it Again* (1975), the latter two being action comedy crime films. Poitier made these films during a period of films referred to as Blaxploitation era.

Although considered as a film genre in its own right, Blaxploitation films drew from a variety of traditional genres like the Western, horror, martial art and gangster genres for tools to scrutinize and criticize the social and political struggle in the American society. The films portrayed the Black hero or heroine as an expression of both social and political consciousness. Blaxploitation films presented strong protagonist who, according to Novotny Lawrence in his examination of *The Historic Labeling of Blackness in Cinema*, displayed the “ability to survive in and navigate the establishment while maintaining their Blackness” (Lawrence 18). In these films, the Black hero or heroine was not a mere symbolic Black-created character or substitute of the stereotypical image of Blacks. They were strong, in control characters that confronted the White establishment for change and respect. In addition, other Black characters supported the hero or heroine to help thread the plot together (Lawrence 19). Blaxploitation movies situated the stories in Black urban locals such as Harlem and Oakland as a way of authenticating the lived realities of these Black communities. Another significant feature of Blaxploitation films is the

creation of Whites as the villain who experienced “the wrath of Black justice” as presented in *Super Fly*, *Cleopatra Jones* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1973) to mention a few (19) and *Shaft* (1971). Shelby explains that Blaxploitation films came into the film scene in the 1970s and were a reaction to the black caricatures of the 1940s and ’50s. She notes that films like *SuperFly* were marked by outrageous and imaginative costuming while the first offering of *Shaft* (1971) has the titular character copied by his fans as he epitomized style and swag for black men with his iconic black leather jacket and black turtleneck cool looks.

Blaxploitation films presented the bad white crime boss who metaphorically represented the White dominated and oppressive political system in America, and the Black protagonist who represented the possibilities, desire and hope for African Americans to someday overturn the racism and oppression that they have had to suffer in the hands of white supremacists in the establishment for decades. Hence, “Blaxploitation” films like Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1970) featured “excessive violence, necessary and significant to the plot” for the Black to defeat the White villain (Lawrence 19). It is a story about a Black heterosexual male prostitute who confronts the corrupt establishment headlong and violence-for-violence, doing all that is necessary to survive a cruel racist world. However, this new and stirring image of the Black protagonist who uses any means necessary to protect himself and his community from the oppressive system also came with a backlash from Black critics. According to Jonathan Munby, these critics felt that the films were “for supporting rather than dismantling the fictions that buttress the master’s house” (101). That said, films like *Sweetback* appealed to both young Blacks and White audiences of the 70s ready for an image of Black empowerment. Several politically inspired Black-oriented stories graced the Blaxploitation Era, and so did black talented actors, black creative writers, directors and producers. These included Melvin Van

Peebles (*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* -1970), actor Richard Roundtree as John Shaft in *Shaft* (1971), and actor Ron O'Neal as Priest in *Super Fly* (1972). They contributed to the efforts to correct the stereotypical impression and representation of the Black males as “sexually savage and serial” and of Black female sexuality as “nonexistent or deviant” in early films like D.W.Griffith's 1915 *The Birth of the Nation*. In the stead of these old stereotypes, they presented images of strong sexually liberated Black protagonists (Bogle 214).

Costumes have played a big role in the character depiction of films – especially African American films over the ages. Shelby notes that over the ages, the American film industry has portrayed African Americans in different light with various uses of costumes in black TV series and films. These films have allowed black people to see themselves reflected in various stories and characters. She notes that costume design has often been overlooked in the achievement of the portrayal of these characters and in these stories. Shelby claims costume design is central to character depictions in black films over the ages in Hollywood, adding that for many decades black costume designers have ensured that they not only correctly portray black characters on screen, rather they have also employed costume design as a political tool to convey messages of freedom, triumph, tension, beauty, and pride.

Shelby explains that in the late 1950s, black actors were stereotyped on screen mostly as slaves or domestic workers, which left little room for creative costuming. She gave the example of Hattie McDaniel's Oscar-winning role as Mammy in 1938's *Gone with the Wind* as an example of this kind of caricature casting because her wardrobe was marked by a house dress, an apron, and a headscarf. However, in the 1957 classic *Carmen Jones*, which stars Dorothy Dandridge as the titular character, Carmen Jones, who is a factory worker who also outside of her blue-collar job wears a curve-hugging red pencil skirt and black off-the-shoulder top, which

later became a fashion signature of the period. Shelby submits that this was significant because the audiences saw something different from the stereotyped costumes of a black character. They saw a black woman portrayed outside of a domestic role and she was also the epitome of glamour as she was dressed in luxe fur coats, dresses cinched at the waist, and gold hoops. She adds that the role of the costume ensured that Dandridge made history as the first black woman to be nominated for a Best Actress Academy Award, which she didn't win, but she was able to send an empowering message to a lot of black women. As the narratives changed, the need for costumes also changed with time and need to ensure that the black narrative is properly told.

In spite of its novelty and incredible cultural impact on the audience of all racial orientations, and despite its impact on new generation of filmmakers and creative artists, the Blaxploitation genre had, by the mid-1970s, generally run out of steam. This was due to the continued backlash and criticism it suffered for instigating violence but, most importantly, to the fact that Hollywood had turned its economic interest to a more profitably viable genre – the blockbuster films.

The blockbuster genre began in 1975 during the Blaxploitation movement and quickly won the attention of both White and Black audience regardless of race or ethnic orientation. This was because it focused on stories that “tone down the Black-White confrontation” making it easy for Hollywood to worry less about productions that solely engage Black presence (Lawrence 97). Box office reports on turnouts for *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973) backed this new direction in showing that 35 percent of the audiences were African Americans. Hollywood, as commercially minded as ever, chose to invest more on this crossover genre. From the mid to late 1970s a high volume of impressionable blockbuster films like *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), *Saturday Night Fever* (1978) made huge box-office profits for the industry but



unfortunately led to the demise of Black inspired films. By the late 1970s, “most Black performers found themselves playing supporting roles that sometimes looked like those from 1930’s or 1950s”—like the stereotype Black images of “the coon, the buck and the mammy”—to the big screen (Bogle 242). Bogle calls this period the “Era of Tan” -- “a time when films did all they could to make audiences forget the Blackness of a Black star” (Bogle 242). Still, the most financially viable roles and productions went to the White performers and filmmakers as the number of Black film actors and directors decreased significantly.

In the 1980s, Black presence included comedians-turned-actors such as Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg and Bill Cosby (Berrry and Berry 16). These personalities were regular on the silver screen, not just for their talents but also importantly as draws of Black audiences. In a short time, more male and female black comedians, such as Bernie Mac, Steve Harvey, Mo’Nique, Chris Tucker, and Chris Rock joined the earlier stars on the big scene (Berry and Berry 16). About the same time, black directors like Spike Lee emerged. Lee made a lasting impression on the film industry with his first independently produced film *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986). Lee followed his first film with other movies that addressed issues of race such as *Have it with School Dazz* (1988), *Do the Right thing* (1989), *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Malcom X* (1992), *Summer of Sam* (1999) and several more. The period also saw Robert Townsends’ *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987), Keenen Ivory Wayan’s *I’m Gonna Get You Sucka* (1988), and Mario Van Peebles’s *New Jack City* (1991) to list a few. All of these increased the presence of Black actors. Spike Lee for instance, cast mainly Black actors in stories often motivated by Black experience, it follows logically that the projection of Black actors would do justice to the films.

The 1990s onwards has witnessed more growth in Black representation with directors such as John Singleton who, like Lee, debuted an acclaimed feature titled *Boyz in the Hood*

(1991). Singleton, also like Lee, continued to work in Hollywood directing films like *Poetic Justice* (1993), *Higher Learning* (1995), *Rosewood* (1997), *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003), *Four Brothers* (2005), and *Shaft* (2000). Directed by John Singleton, *Shaft* (2000) is one of set of the *Shaft* films. The first one was in 1971 as Blaxploitation films. However, the 2000 film was a modern-day sequel to the 1971 first film in the series with the same title with Samuel L. Jackson starring as the titular character, John Shaft. It explored Shaft's determined efforts at getting justice for a fellow African American who was racially abused and killed by a white spoilt son of a rich man in New York. His pursuit of justice led him to quitting his job at the NYPD and setting up a career as a Private Investigator. *Shaft* (2000) was more Afrofuturistic in its outlook than *Shaft* (1971) of the Blaxploitation era. Although it could be argued that, there exists a fine line of difference between the 2000 and 1970 edition of *Shaft*. The 2000 edition was seeking justice for a black man who was exploited – in line with the earlier mentioned theme in Blaxploitation films. However, the 2000 edition was more Afrofuturistic because it painted a utopian image of what the African Americans should or would do in the face of injustice. The 2000 Shaft character is a model for the African Americans to the stand for their rights against injustice. Although it could be argued that it was not a sci-fi film or that it did not explore the use of scientific means to portray the future of African Americans, the film compensated for that with its realistic creation of a hero to lead the black people in their struggles against all form of injustice. Unlike the 1971 *Shaft* edition, Samuel L Jackson's costume as *Shaft* in 2000 experienced a tremendous amount of change. The costume designer Olivia Miles woke up to the challenge posed by the rapid change in the film industry and fashion world. She reveals to the New York Post that during the design process it was decided that *Shaft's* costume will not include the black leather jacket synonymous with the 1971 *Shaft* character rather she adds that

“we came up with our own color palette, which was deep and rich and looked good against the gritty [NYC backdrop].” Furthermore, Miles adds that this ensured that the looks and brands that have been embraced by blacks and urban communities for a long time were being heralded as luxury and aspirational to the mainstream. A lot of creativity was also required by the designers to meet up with the demand of dressing the characters to the taste of the black audiences who wanted popular culture characters with its slick, edgy, and gritty costuming. Hence, the choice of bold colors for Shaft’s costume against the regular black color is an Afrofuturistic call on African Americans to push beyond boundaries of the typical to the unimaginable future.

Another Black filmmaker of this period, Carl Franklin, is not as popular as Singleton and Lee but has demonstrated impressive skills in directing thrillers and dramas like *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), *One True Thing* (1998), and *Out of Time* (2003). In 1991 Julie Dash directed the first full-length general theatrical release by a black female filmmaker in the United States. The period also witnessed notable actors like Angela Bassett, Halle Berry, Don Cheadle, Morgan Freeman, Samuel L. Jackson, Will Smith and Denzel Washington joined in the new wave of Black representation, legitimizing their positions as stars through various roles to date. African American musicians like Prince, Ice T, Queen Latifah, Ice Cube, LL Cool J, Will Smith, Kelly Rowland and others have joined the of African Americans on the silver screen and carrying their loyal music fans along with them to the box office (Berry and Berry 17). Among the more recent crop of African American directors are Albert and Allen Hughes of *The Book of Eli* (2010) and Ava DuVernay of *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018) Meanwhile, the older generation of filmmakers like Spike Lee have continued to produce film with his more recent features like *Bamboozled* (2000) *Chi-Raq* (2015), *BlackkKlansman* (2018).

In the contemporary era, the Afrofuturism is pronounced more than it was in the Civil Rights era as African American film producers got more daring with their views of what the image of African American should look like in the future. Gena-Mour Barrett explains that critics have often gone against the lack of racial diversity and inclusion found in science fiction because it's rare to see a non-white lead character. Undertaking a study of the top 100 highest-grossing films in the US, Barrett said diversity-focused book publisher Lee and Low Books found out that just eight of those 100 movies had a non-white protagonist, as of 2014 – with six of the eight starring Will Smith. She says the long-term exclusion of people of colour from sci-fi gave birth to Afrofuturism in films as it is currently known. The contemporary era focused on creating black dominated sci-fi films to rival their 'white' counterparts. This daringness gave birth to the production of such films as Frances Bodomo's *Afronauts* in 2014, *Blade* in 1998, which starred Wesley Snipes, *Brown Girl Begins* in 2017, *Crumbs* in 2015, C.J Obasi's *Hello, Rain* in 2018, *The Last Angel of History* in 1996, among others. These films transported the blacks from their respective current realities into what they each think is the ideal future for the black race.

*Black Panther*, with a black director and featuring a host of black actors, is one of the latest films to emerge in the saga of African American's representation on the silver screen. Indeed, *Black Panther* has emerged at a time when, although black people are swelling the rank of actors in Hollywood film industry, is still dominated by White screenwriters, producers, directors, and even performers. In fact, given the achievements (including the streaming rate of their works via internet outlets) of African American artistes, the half dozen Oscar Awards handed to black actors so far is too little recognition compared to their contribution. Further, as Ed Guerrero notes, some of the old stereotypical representations have remained in Hollywood

films, where blacks are casted as slaves, monsters, villains, criminals, among others (Guerrero 41). In this context, indeed, against the long history of misrepresenting black people in American film, *Black Panther* offers an empowering representation of black identity that is remarkable for Hollywood: never in the history of Hollywood had a mainstream Sci-Fi film made a black superhero (or even black people and culture) central to its narrative. *Black Panther* achieves this with Afrofuturistic expression—an artistic reimagining of African American history, identity and power through futuristic representation.

### 3.3. A Summary of the Story of *Black Panther*

*Black Panther*, produced by Marvel Studios and distributed by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, is the 18th film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Directed by Ryan Coogler; The cast included Chadwick Boseman in the lead role of T'Challa / Black Panther (the titular character derived from a Marvel Comics character of the same name). Other stars included Michael B. Jordan, Lupita Nyong'o, Danai Gurira, Martin Freeman, Daniel Kaluuya, Letitia Wright, Winston Duke, Angela Bassett, Forest Whitaker, and Andy Serkis. The plot of *Black Panther* is set in Wakanda a highly technologically advanced future African nation. It follows the story of T'Challa, who is crowned king of Wakanda after his father's death. The film's point of entry in the story occurs a thousand years after a defining event. In that event, five tribes had warred over a meteorite containing a precious metal called vibranium. One warrior, after ingesting a "heart-shaped herb", developed superhuman abilities and was able to unite all the tribes—except the Jabari tribe—to form the African nation of Wakanda. He was named the first "Black Panther" – title of the country's monarch. Wakandans make a good use of vibranium to

develop their advanced technology but they also protected their wealth and technology by isolating themselves from the rest of the world and posing as a Third World country.

Forward in time to 1992, Wakanda's King T'Chaka (T'Challa's father) visits his brother N'Jobu, who is working as a spy in Oakland, California. T'Chaka accuses N'Jobu of assisting black-market arms dealer named Ulysses Klaue to steal vibranium from Wakanda. N'jobu denies this charge but N'Jobu's partner reveals himself as Zuri, another undercover Wakandan, and confirms T'Chaka's suspicions. N'Jobu attacks Zuri, forcing T'Chaka to kill the former. T'Chaka orders Zuri to lie in Wakanda that N'Jobu has disappeared. They leave N'Jobu's American-born son behind in order to maintain the lie. Forward in time to present day in the film, T'Chaka's son T'Challa returns to Wakanda to ascend the throne after the death of his father in a terrorist attack. He and Okoye, leader of the royal family's all-women warrior guards (Dora Milaje regiment) extract T'Challa's ex-lover Nakia from an undercover assignment so she can join T'Challa's mother Ramonda and younger sister Shuri at his coronation. At the ceremony, M'baku, leader of the renegade Jabarisi challenges T'Challa for the crown in a ritual combat but is defeated.

Meanwhile, in London the earlier-mentioned Klaue and his accomplice Erik Stevens steal a Wakandan artifact from a museum. T'Challa vows to recover the artifact. His friend Okoye's lover W'Kabi urges him to bring Klaue back alive. T'Challa, Okoye, and Nakia travel to Busan, South Korea, where Klaue plans to sell the artifact to CIA agent Everett Ross. T'Challa, captures a fleeing Klaue after a fight but reluctantly, releases him into Ross' custody. Erik attacks Ross to extract Klaue gravely injuring the former. Rather than pursue Klaue, T'Challa takes Ross to Wakanda, where Shuri works to heal Ross with the country's advanced technology. T'Challa learns from Zuri that the late N'Jobu had planned to share Wakanda's technology with people of African descent around the world to help them conquer their oppressors. N'jobu's son, left

behind by T'Chaka and Zuri, is called N'Jadaka and grew up to be Stevens, a U.S. black ops soldier with the nickname "Killmonger". Killmonger seeks to take Wakanda out of its isolation and use the country's technologically sophisticated weapons for a global revolution. After Zuri's revelation to T'Challa, Killmonger kills the wanted Klaue and presents his body at Wakanda to gain entry in the country. Killmonger reveals his identity to the tribal elders, a claim to the throne and challenges T'Challa for it in ritual combat. In fight, Killmonger overpowers T'Challa and throws T'Challa down a waterfall to his presumed death.

Presuming T'Challa dead, Killmonger ingests the heart-shaped herb for super-ordinary power and orders the rest to be burnt, but Nakia succeeds in extracting one first. Killmonger, with the support of a turncoat W'Kabi and his army, prepares to ship Wakandan weapons to operatives around the world. Meanwhile, Nakia, Shuri, Ramonda, and the now-healed Ross flee to the Jabaris for help, where they find T'Challa in a coma, already rescued by the renegade tribe for sparing M'Baku's life in their historic ritual fight. They offer T'Challa the herb which heals him and restores his panther powers. He returns to fight his cousin Killmonger, who has already donned his own Black Panther suit. Turncoat W'Kabi and his army fight Shuri, Nakia, and the Dora Milaje, while Ross remotely flies a jet and shoots down planes to prevent the attempt to export the vibranium weapons. M'Baku and the Jabari arrive to reinforce T'Challa's forces. In a fight at Wakanda's vibranium mine, T'Challa impairs Killmonger's supersuit and stabs him. Killmonger refuses healing and chooses to die free rather than be imprisoned. T'Challa sets up a community outreach center at the Oakland location where Killmonger's father died. He also appears before the United Nations to reveal Wakanda's true nature to the world.

### 3.4. Impact of *Black Panther* on the American Community and the World at Large

According to Carvell Wallace, two white American comic book writers Stan Lee and Jack Kirby originally conceived Marvel Comics' Black Panther character in 1966 in a bid to offer black readers a character to identify with. At the time, young black activists frustrated with the pace and non-violent tactics of the Civil Rights Movement (its failure to combat police brutality and other injustices because of its belief in peaceful resistance) had begun a Black Power Movement with a more radical strategy for racial equality, fairness, and black economic, cultural and political empowerment in the United States. Kirby and Lee named the character they conceived after the Black Panther Party—an organizational element of the movement that fused black nationalist ideology and Marxist-Leninist doctrine with the aim of overthrowing capitalist society and combating police brutality (Wallace, 611). As a movement that asserts Black Power, its political perspective gave it a unique identity and made it useful for rallying Black youths to fight for improvements of the living conditions of Blacks in America.

From the *Black Panther* character's initial comic depiction as one of Marvel Comics 'Fantastic Four' to its translation into the central character of an American superhero movie *Black Panther*, it has represented black might and intellect and become coterminous with black power. As of September 2019, the *Black Panther* film had the second highest all-time domestic box office revenue in North America—second only to *Avengers: Endgame*. Indeed, it is not the first movie superhero movie with a black superhero. Robert Townsend's superhero comedies *The Meteor Man* (1993) and *Blankman* (1994), Stephen Norrington's vampire superhero film *Blade* (1998), and Peter Berg's *Hancock* (2008) all had black superheroes. However, *Black Panther* is more than a superhero's journey, it is about black culture's journey (Tre Johnson). African Americans' frenzy about *Black Panther* is because it is consciously and purposefully black (Wallace). "It is the first time in a very long time that we're seeing a film with centered black



people, where we have a lot of agency,” said Jamie Broadnax, founder of Black Girl Nerds, a pop-culture site focused on sci-fi and comic-book fandoms (qtd by Wallace). The *Black Panther* characters, she added, “are rulers of a kingdom, inventors and creators of advanced technology. We’re not dealing with black pain, and black suffering, and black poverty.”

*Black Panther*, then, is unequivocally a groundbreaking celebration of black culture. According to Johnson, American news, films and other media have traditionally represented Africa as naïve, backward, savage, and chaotic, and given little room for other interpretations of the continent. Thus, *Black Panther*’s vision of an African nation—an exciting metropolis of futuristic skyscrapers, racing trains, and soaring spaceships—was a refreshing image for the audience. In an interview with the *New York Times* Camille Friend, the film’s hair stylist, said the producers of the film measured the entire production against the backdrop of a bigger black cultural moment “when people are feeling empowered about being black” (Johnson). It is no surprise then, that in a viral video on Twitter in which three young men by a *Black Panther* poster at a movie theater, one jokingly embraces the poster while another asks, rhetorically: “This is what white people get to feel all the time?” They laugh, and as though delivering the punch line to a painful joke, add: “I would love this country, too” (Wallace). By conceiving Wakanda with the vision of an Africa that is home to a thriving black population and represents a collective ingenuity and beauty, the film offered a refreshing image for black people starved of this sort of vision about themselves on the big screen and in other media.

*Black Panther* sparked conversations all over social and traditional media around the world. After the reveal of the film’s premiere date, African Americans posted pictures of Kente cloth du-rags, King Jaffe Joffer from *Coming to America* with his lion-hide sash—with captions like “This is how I show up to the Black Panther premiere (Carvell Wallace).” The internet

exploded after the release; twitter reported that *Black Panther* was one of the most tweeted-about films of 2017 and 2018. Users made plans for viewing parties and hash tags like #BlackPantherSoLit and #WelcomeToWakanda trended for months (Wallace). *Black Panther* rode on the premise that Marvel's comic book superheroes are always political. The film's "cultural and political" effect included *Black Panther*-themed watch parties, a voter registration initiative, and a curriculum for educators to use the film to teach African culture, politics, and history (Tre Johnson). It generated dialogue and reflections about black identity with the tag #WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe. It promoted discussion about events in the history of the African global community: from the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the colonization of African countries to the Black Lives Matter movement and the Chibok schoolgirls' kidnapping in Nigeria.

*Black Panther's* greatest legacy, then, is what it did for black culture (Johnson). Pointing out that somewhere within black Americans is an image in which they are whole and home, Wallace observes that *Black Panther* offered space for multiple generations of black Americans to store some of their most deeply held aspirations (Wallace). It told its story from a posture of black power and pride. It provided African Americans with what the American Psychological Association calls RES—a "racial and ethnic socialization" that provides a robust sense of self and serves as a cushion against racism and discrimination (Turner). Through fictional Wakanda, *Black Panther* displayed the vibrancy, communalism, spirituality and strength that have defined African and African American communities. The film showed the rich diversity of peoples of African descent, foregrounding the various shades of black identity and shattering the reductively monolithic picture of African people (Turner). An epoch-making production—the first major superhero movie to center African heritage and identity—*Black Panther* offered the

audience a futuristic world into African Americans can escape: where they can imagine themselves outside a white gaze and be reminded that they have the ability to soar and take action like T'Challa, Nakia or Okoye—to be strong black agents of justice (Johnson).

### 3.5. The Concept of Afrofuturism

A principal way in which *Black Panther* inspired an empowering sense of black selfhood and identity was through Afrofuturistic expression—specifically, by imagining a glorious, African future away from the past subjections of black people in America's racial history. In his 1993 *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, cultural critic Mark Dery coined the term Afrofuturism and defined it as a “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno culture” (736). Explaining Dery, Adriano Elia states that due to the black community's imagination of possible futures, “African-American voices have other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come” (83). Elia, himself, sees Afrofuturism as a “transnational and trans-disciplinary cultural movement based upon the unusual connection between the marginality of allegedly “primitive” people of the African diaspora and “modern” technology and science fiction” (84). To this end, Afrofuturism does not just project a hopeful future. It has an epistemological purpose: to rewrite specific stereotypes—such as of primitivism and backwardness—that deny Africans' contributions to art and knowledge. For instance an Afrofuturistic performance that supplants old stereotypes with new ones (*Guess Who is Coming to Dinner*) can allow for the revision of established ideas and cultivation of the new ones. He maintains that the intelligent contributions of Afrofuturist creatives—from writers, musicians, artists, and filmmakers, to critics—defy historical stereotypes of black peoples by the Western world, such as the view of Africa as a dystopia.

They are counter-histories that imagine positive alternative roles for people of African descent in the future, rewrite history and ensure the reconsideration of these Africans' roles in Western society. To achieve their purposes, Afrofuturists use a wide range of genres and media to speculate about the condition of racial, economic, social and cultural subordination (Elia 84).

Lisa Yaszek's idea of Afrofuturism in *Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future* takes a somewhat different path from Elia's. Elia conceives of Afrofuturism through the lens of racial relations and revalidation. Yaszek, on the other hand, defines Afrofuturism as "a larger aesthetic mode that encompasses a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media who are united by their shared interest in projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences" (42). This definition focuses on the idea of racial cooperation than on Elia's idea of racial recognition/revalidation. Yaszek, however, acknowledges that Afrofuturism can be critical inquiry. She observes that Afrofuturist Alondra Nelson for instance, sees the work of an Afrofuturist scholar as an exploration of futurist themes in African or African-American cultural productions, particularly how technological affect black art and culture (Yaszek 42). Indeed, Nelson herself, observes that Afrofuturism concerns itself with "sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovations in the African diaspora" (Nelson 9). Still, for Nelson, Afrofuturism is closely tied to Africans' experience of identity in diaspora –Afrofuturism, she maintains, entails, "original narratives of identity, technology, and the future" (Nelson 9).

Tracing the history of Afrofuturist storytelling and relating it to that of science fiction, Yaszek locates the origins of the genre in scientifically and technologically-inspired stories of 19th-century authors (43). She lists authors like Mary Shelley and H.G. Wells in Great Britain, Jules Verne in France, and Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne in the United States, who updated older story forms with references to modern scientific and technological developments,

creating a new mode of literature that “directly engaged the changing face of science and the society as a whole” (Yaszek 43). Yaszek points out that Afrofuturist stories by African Americans writers like Martin Delany, Charles Chesnutt, and Edward Johnson appear around this period, with similar features similar (Yaszek 44). Delany’s 1857 novel *Blake, or the Huts of America* is an alternate history novel in which Cuban and American slaves engineer a successful revolution (Delany 383). Chesnutt’s 1887 short story *The Goophered Grapevine*, combines elements of gothic and trickster narratives to examine the relations between northern whites and southern blacks. Johnson’s 1904 novel *Light Ahead for the Negro* depicts an African-American man who travels into the future and explores a racially-egalitarian socialist America (383).

Also writing about Afrofuturism Eshun Kodwo sees it as an attempt to recognize Africa by revising existing narratives about the continent that are largely about woe and depletion. He explains that narratives about Africa’s social reality are filled with menacing global scenarios, damning economic projections, unfair weather predictions and alarming medical reports on AIDS and life-expectancy forecasts – all of which project decades of economic impoverishment (291-292). Kodwo observes that to counter these tales of woe and depletion Afrofuturism takes Africa as its major concern and makes it an object of futuristic projection (291). Afrofuturism projects a beautiful picture of Africa to correct narratives of woe and reclaim stolen legacies legacies of Africa/ns contributions to science and civilization (297). It challenges the idea that Africa is a metaphor for catastrophe with an optimistic futuristic representation of the African experience (301). Kodwo reacts to the possibility that people might misconstrue futuristic representations of African history/realities as a naïve Utopian idealization of the harsh realities of the African past (297). He reiterates that Afrofuturism does not downplay the reality of slavery

for instance, but seeks reduce its negative impact: to redirect its implications through “cultural fantasy and modern science-fiction (300).

Fantasy and fiction then, are at the heart of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturistic expression, need not be observable or probable but must have instructive basis. Afrofuturists might, for example, use extra-terrestriality as a trope to explore the historical terms/implications of the dislocation and (re)constitution of Black Atlantic subjectivities (Kodwo 298). Kodwo explains that use of this trope is not escapism from the historical realities of our terrestrial life but rather a hyperbolic means of identification with the potential of space and distance in the volatile field of racial hostility. He asserts that science fiction serves the retelling of Afrodiasporic history because it can function as allegories of the experiences of Africans and African Americans (299). In that regard, Afrofuturism is not merely concerned with correcting history. And, more than just the featuring of black people in science fiction stories it recognizes profound connection between black experience and science fiction. Kodwo explains that most science-fiction stories deal with how individuals contend with their estranging and dislocating societies/situations. This, he adds, also sums up the experiences of black people (298). Abducting Africans from their native lands to unknown destinations for slavery, for instance, is a traumatic experience akin to the alien abductions in science-fiction stories (299) Afrofuturism is a reality-based ideology that links science fiction and social realities with a feedback loop. (299).

If utopian performances, are the kind that provide a place for people to come together for , embodied “meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world” (Dolan 2) for intimating a better future world, then we can conceive of Afrofuturism as a kind of utopian performance that includes but excides science fiction. If we are to think of Afrofuturism as fundamentally an utopian imagining that reflect

/inflect and or inverses our sense of the past to imagine a better future, then we might consider much of black representation as afrofuturistic gesture and costuming as a art and craft at the very heart of that imaging. Wallace has described Afrofuturism as a decidedly black created artistic movement that is meant to exceed the historic limitations of the white imagination. He writes that it projects not just the idea that black people will exist in the future and use technology and science but, more importantly, the idea that black people have won the future—and it does so by imagining what that future would be. *Black Panther* is an example of this Afrofuturistic imagination (Wallace).

Whereas earliest films represented black people as *Uncle Toms*, *Coons*, *Mammies* and *Brutal Black Bucks*, *Black Panther* imagines them as powerful wielders of technology who can do magic with science. *Black Panther* reimagines black experience in an empowering futuristic way that helps us to rethink our history. With no mainstream Black superhero film *Black Panther* becomes a significant part of 21st Century history of Black films in America. In the next chapter, I examine how the film achieved its Afrofuturistic expression with a focus on costume design: specifically, how the film futuristically imagined black experience through the refreshing representation of power and identity in the costume design

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MICHEL FOUCAULT'S THEORY OF POWER AND *BLACK PANTHER*

#### 4.1. Overview

Richard Lynch opines that the purpose of Foucault's theory of power is to increase peoples' awareness of how power has shaped their ways of being, thinking and acting, and making it possible for them to change those ways (Lynch 24). It is shift of focus of the analysis of power from an idea of it as sovereign to an idea of it as discursive and, related to that, as a regime of truth. I will address how power operates as a regime of truth in the fictional Wakanda in *Black Panther* and how this is manifested in costume.

#### 4.2. Background to Michel Foucault's Analysis of Power

Foucault takes a decidedly different path from the traditional account of power, that is, the view that power is the ability to compel obedience with the use of sanctions where considered necessary. This traditional account of power represents certain conceptions. One is the existence of coercion: this entails the capacity of the sovereign's (either a monarch or other forms of leadership) to compel obedience through the application of force in the form of sanctions. Such punitive measures make it such that people would act otherwise than they would without the existence of sanctions. This is the understanding of power before Michel Foucault's intervention.

Foucault's aim is to expand the understanding of power and give it a more comprehensive outlook by addressing the elements of power, which seem to have been subsumed by the traditional account of power. In order to do this, Foucault addresses a couple of different types of power—disciplinary power, and biopower. Dean Mitchell in *Governmentality: Power and Rule*



*in Modern Society* describes sovereign, disciplinary and biopower as the ‘triangle of power’ upon which Foucault’s analysis is built (Mitchell 122).

#### 4.2.1. Michel Foucault on Types/Forms of Power

Michel Foucault links sovereign power to the exercise of power outside face to face confrontations. Sovereign power replaces and repudiates face-to-face confrontations rather than the usual confrontation which would yield obedience, the structure of sovereign power takes care of that through the use of sanction as a means of enforcing obedience. In *Foucault's Theory of Power*, Richard Lynch provides further analysis on Foucault’s idea of sovereign power (14). Foucault, Lynch posited, described sovereign power as one that is similar to a pyramid, where one person or a group of people at the top holds the power. While the other people are at the bottom of the pyramid and in the middle parts are the people who obey and enforce the sovereign’s orders. (14). This pyramid approach forms the structure of sovereign power. The relationship between the sovereign and the subject is subsequently built on the understanding of existing inclination towards force and sanctions if subjects fail to act in line with the dictates of the sovereign. An instance of sovereign power is absolute monarchy, wherein the sovereign is on top, the subjects are below and the subjects are obliged to obey the dictates of the sovereign.

With the description of sovereign power through anthropological research, rather than assume that the King-Subject relationship has been excoriated from the discourse of power and power relations, Foucault argues that power needs to be understood in another form. Foucault takes a new approach to the interrogation of power. Rather than assume that the structure of power relation of the subjective type has been out rightly eliminated he asserts in his book, *The*

*History of Sexuality*, that “in political thought and analysis, we have still not cut off the head of the King” (Foucault 89). Foucault gets more detailed about this, saying:

The sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing; he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring. The right which was formulated as the "power of life and death" was in reality the right to take life or let live. Its symbol, after all, was the sword (Foucault 136).

A shift from the analysis of sovereign power would ordinarily suggest that the replacement of monarchy with modern government would mark the end of the form of King-Subject relationship which makes coercion and other forms of force integral part of the exercise of power. However, such optimism has been denied, hence the metaphorical expression that we have still not cut off the head of the king. What Foucault does is to approach power from a different perspective and show how that power is not only present in modern institutions, but has become diffused through the *discursive* means under which it is exercised. For instance, in *The Order of Things*, he asserts that the thought that power has become representative is not only elusive, but could be considered as far from being the case. He defends this view by calling representation “that sovereign vanishing-point, indefinitely distant but constituent” (Foucault 277).

Foucault is convinced that the traditional analysis of power as sovereign fails to capture the diffused nature of power. To capture its totality a new analysis—one of power as a form of normalization—was his approach to power. In approach, he asks us not to consider power as coercive, but rather as a scheme through which various mechanisms are designed for the exercise of power without the kind of force requisite and observable in sovereign power. Two new ideas of power emerge from Foucault’s fresh approach; disciplinary power and biopower.

These two types of power take off from one conviction that the state can exercise control in a different form. Hence, rather than apply coercion as seen in sovereign power, modern state uses the establishment of rules, and the following of such rules as the basis for organization of the state. Obedience to the state is consequently seen as rule following rather than as coercion. Furthermore, the state establishes a series of institutions to ensuring that people do not derail from the established norms of the society. We can interpret this as an assumption that the state has the authority to act in the capacity of preserving the norms of the society. It is within this conception that the idea of law as a tool of adjudication is established. To this end, institutions such as the prisons, and schools are considered as appropriate means of instilling the ideas of rules and correction of derailment from rules. Thus while schools serve as socializing agents for the indoctrination of people into the rules established, prisons serve as institutions for correcting derailment from these rules. According to Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, prisons disciplinary power is used to transform prisoners from law-breaking criminals into law-abiding citizens, capable of living in the boundaries of society. It is through change in behavior that disciplinary power is displayed (Foucault 231-236). Like the prisoners we become disciplined we internalize rules and consequently obey them without being coerced.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault emphasizes that power could also be positive and not only the negative kind observable in sovereign power. On this, Foucault says that discipline arranges a positive economy and it is a question of extracting, from time, evermore available moments and, from each moment, ever more useful forces (Foucault 154). In *The Subject and Power*, he expresses the view that power has positive elements in the new analysis, and that is why it the adoption and acceptance of those rules prove the diffused nature of power. (Foucault 341). In schools, prisons, churches and hospitals, authorities of the state use a more subtle

approach of control over people, one that is framed as aiding or guiding their thinking and self-image in a certain direction (Foucault 186-187).

Marcelo Hoffman adds some analysis of what this entails. On disciplinary power, Marcelo Hoffman, in *Disciplinary Power*, posits that Foucault believes that it aims to use the body's skills as effectively as possible, saying that the more useful the body becomes, the more obedient it also has to become and that the purpose of this is to also prevent these skills from being used to revolt against power (Hoffman 27-39). Foucault himself gives conditions of disciplinary power that make up its characteristics. In *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault asserts that the organization of individuals and space according to function and rank is one. In fact, he says 'discipline is an art of rank' (Foucault 1979: 146). The control of human activity by the system is another element (this has been expressed above). Foucault further affirms the mechanism of normalization by stating that "the success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination" (Foucault 1979: 170).

Chloe Taylor in *Biopower* claims that Foucault believes that life (bios) has power over populations (Taylor 46). Biopower primarily rests on rules adopted by people, rather than external force, as it encourages, strengthens, controls, observes, optimizes and organize the forces below it. It emphasizes the impact of life over death and pays more attention to lives than death as Foucault believes that man has "the power to keep people alive when they should be dead and to decide when to "let them die"" (Taylor 49). Foucault asserted that Biopower can use disciplinary techniques while its target is population rather than individuals. Biopower entails the power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death. He emphasizes that in Biopower:

Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the

mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself: it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body.  
(Foucault 142-3)

#### 4.3. Michel Foucault's Sovereign Power and its Demonstration in *Black Panther*

In *Black Panther*, Wakanda embraces a monarchical form of government. However, power in Wakanda is more complex than sovereign power. Take, for example, the symbolic act of paying obeisance to the King. There is the notion of King-Subject relationship there. Yet, here, it is more the normalizing force of tradition, rather than coercion that is at work here. Why have the producers picked a monarchical form of government for Wakanda? The answer lies in what I see as an attempt to capture a political and social outlook of an African society that is untouched by west. It is an implicit repudiation of western forms of representative government as necessarily superior to the monarchical forms in Africa that preceded European colonization.

Accepting that exploitation and domination has been with us since the beginning of time, Foucault maintains that previous movements in 15th and 16th century Europe were aimed at reformation, a religious and moral revolution and a struggle against subjection. The evocation of a pre-colonial form of African governance in *Black Panther* is a representation of a contrasting African form of monarchical rule without the absoluteness Foucault emphasizes about sovereign power. Wakanda is more complex form than the sovereign power Foucault analyzed anthropologically. For Foucault, the use of force and coercion is the manner through which the monarch ensures the obedience of the subject. This however, is not the way power operates in Wakanda despite the existence of a king. The film suggests we need not necessarily equate monarchy with the coercive force Foucault discusses on sovereign power.

In *Power, Subjectification and Resistance in Foucault*, Kevin Jon Heller noted that subjects differ in the kinds of tactics they choose; however, no subject's choice of tactics is ever the unconditioned product of a self-standing outside of history (Heller 91). He further stated that despite the fact that all subjects are equally not free – as much as their choice of tactics is inevitably mediated by an institutionally-determined tradition over which they have little or no control– their intentionality has never been completely their own (Heller 91). From my observation of the expression of power in *Black Panther*, the pyramid analyses of sovereign power, does not fully explain the king's actions. The king is a superhero, and some of the attributes assigned to a king inclined towards the use of coercion and force are not applicable to him in the film.

We can buttress this point further with the example of the return of Killmonger to Wakanda. If we used the sovereign power analysis out rightly, T'Challa would have declined the offer of combat since as the king, his sovereign power could not be challenged. However, the dependence on the cultural framework of Wakanda made it mandatory for T'Challa to compete with Killmonger when challenged, and this speaks of the non-absolute nature of the monarchical power depicted in *Black Panther*. How then, might we explain something such as the obeisance to the king in the film. This brings my focus to the analysis of power as a regime of truth by Foucault and how this plays out in *Black Panther*.

#### 4.4. Power as the Regime of Truth in *Black Panther*

Richard Lynch explains that Foucault believes that most people misconstrue power, hence, he elucidated that power cannot be totally labeled as: a group of institutions or mechanisms whose aim it is for a citizen to obey and yield to the state; yielding to rules or; a general and

oppressing system where one societal class or group oppresses another (Lynch 15). Foucault however, cautioned that these descriptions could be seen as power but they are insufficient enough to describe all what power is and the forms it comes in, claiming that a liberal definition of power will hide other forms of power to the extent that people will unarguably accept it (Lynch 15). This understanding leads to what Foucault would call power as the regime of truth. Regime of truth refers to the set of norms which a people embrace and consider as important to the continuous flourishing of the society. That they accept these sets of rules to be part of the necessary conditions for their existence makes it the truth which they have accepted and which they continue to use as guides for their lives as individuals on one and for the survival of the society on the other hand.

To effectively do this, Foucault recognizes the application of what he terms the knowledge regime, and this knowledge regime subsequently transforms into regime of truth. In this, knowledge is linked to power. According to Foucault, in his work, *Two Lectures*, this is done in two ways. First, knowledge regime exhibits traits that make it assume the authority of the 'truth'. Secondly, this is done because the regime of knowledge is in fact capable of the power to make itself true. Foucault contrasts this knowledge regime with the discipline. He writes:

Disciplines are the bearers of a discourse, but this cannot be the discourse of right. The discourse of discipline has nothing in common with that of law, rule, or sovereign will. The disciplines may well be the carriers of a discourse that speaks of a rule, but this rule is not the juridical rule deriving from sovereignty, but a natural rule, a norm. The code they come to define is not that of law but that of normalization. (44)

Power as the regime of truth, then, could be considered as a consequence of the Foucault's idea of normalization of power. Regimes of truth differ place-to-place and time to time: the regime of truth in Wakanda is different from the regime of truth in Oakland. Every society has what they considered as their truth and the entire fabric of the society is woven around this truth. For instance, in America notion of freedom for all is highly valued as the American truth. Since the truth regime, according to Foucault is something that every member of the society subscribes to without the involvement of force or coercion, how does power as the regime of truth play out in *Black Panther*? I suggest in the following that the truth regime of the Wakandan society is related to their history and that it has to do with their values of non-violence, unity, and tradition-cum-technological development , and that the latter allows Wakanda to keep a two-face identity to the outside world.

Wakanda is determined to protect its developed technology by making the kingdom look like it is traditional at the same time technologically sophisticated. These explain the clash between Killmonger and T'Challa over certain ideas about life: what is true, valuable, and what should be privileged. Killmonger's idea of truth/value, which he wanted to but failed to introduce to the Wakanda community when he became king, is the radical notion of using vibranium to forge a worldwide revolution. However, Wakanda's longstanding regime of truth is built around the idea that their power should focus on their survival. They maintained some idea norms that allows them to improve their technological advancements including the lethal ones that they will never use unless forced to defend themselves.

According to the premise of the film, Wakanda was never colonized and its citizens have grown from generation to generation on ideals built on the society's regime of truth. The country prides itself in being the most technologically advanced in the world and committed to the right



use of the power they have inherited from their forefathers in the form of vibranium. One other aspect of their regime of truth is the preservation of their traditional African heritage, which they have never discarded but rather developed in accordance to the dictates of the modern times. Furthermore, self-sufficiency is another aspect Wakanda's regime of truth. Wakanda operates non-violence policy and does not engage in international trade or accept foreign aid. This ensures that it maintains invisibility and the outside world can only imagine that it is a poor African country with no resources. Meanwhile, the country has all it needs to protect itself from external aggression and to destroy any country it wishes to fight against. Generation after generations have maintained this regime of truth until Killmonger threatened it.

Part of Wakanda's regime of truth is the preservation of culture and tradition. The expressions of the community, from its language to its symbols, privilege the preservation of culture and tradition. The people's obeisance is to the king (typical of monarchical governments) regardless of the rejection of monarchy and establishment of representational democracy as the main form of government in many parts of the world. This is a form of biopower, that diffused and ensured that the survival of the society is determined by this preservationist approach to governance and social ordering. The recall of T'Challa from the West so he could take up the throne shows the people's acceptance of the "truth" of the tradition. T'Challa's recall, as shown in the film, is not a spontaneous idea, it is something the people have been socialized into and accept as the truth. As Foucault observes in *Discipline and Punish*, each individual action is directed towards the principle of a rule to be followed.

Technological advancement is seen in all the citizens of Wakanda as they display the nation's advanced technology in all the phases of their lives. They have the most advanced traditional yet technologically-sophisticated equipment. They make use of communication tools,

which are all fashioned out of vibranium. Their clothes, education and health systems make use of the most technologically advanced developments to rival that of the other countries of the world. This dual or two-faced nature of the traditional and technological part of the society is only known to its citizens while the ‘poverty-ridden’ and ‘poor’ tag image is what the outside world believes is the identity of Wakanda. Despite the fact that they were not colonized, they have successfully presented to the rest of the world that Wakanda is poor with no resources except a small amount of vibranium that Ulyses Klaue had stolen. This two-faced / dual identity makes Wakanda stand out and is part of their regime of truth. When they eventually chose to open up to the rest of the world at the United Nation summit, they were still not believed to have anything to offer.

The need for cultural preservation is part of regime of truth. The obedience to authority is built on the basis of a sense of cultural affiliation and social arrangement as displayed in the Warrior Falls coronation rites in which the king-to-be (T’Challa) had to subject himself to physical combat to determine who has the capacity to lead. The idea of cultural preservation is woven into the social and cultural fabric of the Wakandan society. Presence of other kinsmen during the coronation rites extend this social practice further and demonstrate a shared communal affinity

Finally, the value of unity is implicit in the citizens’ acceptance of isolationism in *Black Panther*. One would assume that given the technological development and the existence of a large deposit of the “vibranium” in the country, the isolationism would have been resisted by a large part of the population. Yet, this never happened. In a world where economic and technological supremacy is considered additional strength that States use for diplomacy and

international relations, Wakandans were contented with their life of modesty and isolation from the rest of the world. This could not have been possible without their belief in Unity.

#### 4.5. How is Wakanda's Regime of Truth Challenged in the Film?

According to the film, regime of truth can be seen everywhere in Wakanda society. However, W'Kabi, Killmonger, M'Baku opposed the truth regime as explained in early in the chapter that regime of truth differ from place to place and time to time hence, it can be challenged, resisted, and changed. A good example is well articulated in the coronation ritual combat scene at the Warrior Falls when M'Baku leader of the Jabari tribe challenged the would-be king (T'Challa) to a combat. The Jabari tribe who secluded themselves from the mainstream Wakanda society challenged the unity that has always existed among the four tribes that originally formed the nation of Wakanda. However, the four other tribes – the Merchant, Border, River and Mining tribes – in continuation of unity as truth regime in the nation refused to challenge for the throne. Thus entrusting the continued leadership of the nation to the royal family of the first Black Panther, which is represented by T'Challa. But this was opposed by M'Baku, who is the leader of the Jabari Tribe of the mountains. He opposed the truth regime of unity when he led the Jabari's to challenge for the throne in a ritual combat.

Killmonger challenged every truth regime in Wakanda and sought to change them into what could be seen as negative. However, he was unsuccessful in his attempt but his effort gave birth to a change of the societal truth regime which was the regime of self-preservation and conservation. T'Challa after conquering his cousin (Killmonger) had to establish the Wakandan Research and Outreach Centre in Oakland in the building where his father killed his uncle. This move is a change in the Wakanda's regime of truth. He also changed tradition when he took

Agent Ross, who sustained a life-threatening injury to his spine at the police station scene, to Wakanda for treatment despite Okoye's disapproval, and speaking against the backdrop of the conservation truth regime. T'Challa also established a new truth regime after he declared at the United Nation Assembly that Wakanda is open to share and transfer of knowledge and exchange programmes despite the other countries wondering what the 'poor' nation like Wakanda could offer the rest of the world.

W'Kabi on his part challenged the non-violence truth regime. Bitter that he lost his parents to the bomb which was triggered at the border by Klaue when he came to steal some vibranium weapons in Wakanda, W'Kabi shifted camp to the side of Killmonger after the latter had overthrown T'Challa as the king of Wakanda. He became the arm for the villain who wanted to ship out Wakanda vibranium weapons across the world to cause a world wild revolution against Wakandas' regime of truth of non-violence. W'Kabi in further resistance to the nation's truth regime of unity supported Killmonger when T'Challa returned to complete the fight for the throne. He was however humbled when T'Challa defeated Killmonger. These efforts later contributed to the change in the societal truth regime as Wakanda opened up for the first time in their history to benefit the rest of the world with their knowledge and technological advancements. For M'Baku, who initially resisted the societal truth regime of unity, he changed and assisted and fought side by side T'Challa in battle against Killmonger to preserve the non-violence truth regime of the Wakanda. All of these attributes of biopower and regime of truth were adequately projected in *Black Panther* through costume. This would be properly explored below.

#### 4.6. The Role Costume plays in maintaining the regime of truth in *Black Panther* film.

So how does costume in *Black Panther* help to organize Wakanda's regime of truth? To address this question, we will examine how the costumes in *Black Panther* establish the duality in the society of the traditional-old Africa-new technological revolutionary Africa. This becomes the way Wakanda maintains its truth regime, by pretending to be just the old Africa, when it is actually a new technological Africa. This is also the Afro futuristic element that represents the Africa that is forward looking, future shaped, and presenting an Africa whose truth regime entails a technological advancement. Therefore, through costumes Wakanda present regime of truth that is built on tradition and innovation. The film presents a picture through costume that make its audience think that on the surface this is a traditional society. However, the Border tribe costume and the use of the Kimoyo beads reveals the dual nature of Wakanda as the traditional and at the same time an advanced society.

This is exemplified in the infinity fight scene following the return of T'Challa to reclaim Wakanda's throne from Killmonger who wants to export the country's vibranium weapons across the world to cause a world wide revolution against Wakandas' regime of truth of non-violence. In scene, the men of the Border Tribe, led by W'Kabi (Daniel Kaluuya) fought in solidarity with Killmonger and their blankets became a significant piece tool in the scene. According to Ruth Carter, the costume designer in a YouTube presentation *Vanity Fair: Black Panther's Costume Designer Break Down*, the Lesotho blankets have various design on which vibranium is printed with a technologically customized metallic foil (representing Vibranium) and carrying traditional Akan *Adinkra* symbols vividly imbedded on them presents at a glance a traditional outfit from a rural Africa community however, during the battle scene when T'Challa emerged and determined to stop Killmonger (at the time the ruler of Wakanda) from executing

his plans to deliver Wakanda's vibranium weapon all over the world. The border tribe, now Killmonger supporters jumped in to protect their new leader, they used their blankets to create a shield barrier that prevents the Dora Milages (Wakanda's royal guards) who had joined Black Panther in solidarity to fight and stop Killmonger. The border tribes' blankets at this point seizes to preforms as a normal traditional covering but transforms to a special highly technologically made protective gear charged by vibranium.

Likewise, the Kimoyo beads reveals the societal regime of truth – everyone in Wakanda wears Kimoyo beads because they are a source of communication – they signify the technological advancement of the Wakanda. They also show the traditional conservativeness of the society while displaying their technological prowess. In this way the Kimoyo beads plays the dual role of Wakanda's regime of truth as it represents a regular traditional African beads worn by the entire community as a form of cultural identity. However, according to Ruth Carter in a YouTube presentation, the Kimoyo beads draws attention to an important element of identification evident in the film. She explains that everyone in Wakanda wears *Kimoyo* beads because they are a source of communication. You can bring up holograms; you can talk to people right through your *Kimoyo* beads as exemplified when Okoye contacted T'Challa and W'kabi who were at the Border village that Wakanda had received classified information that Ulysses Klaue an aged long fugitive will be in South Korea to sale a Vibranium artifact to an unidentified buyer. Also, in the throne room Okoye provided the tribal council with further detail on Klaue's plans using the hologram via her Kimoyo beads. Likewise, through hologram by Kimoyo beads Shuri received a signal of Killmonger's arrival at the Border village. With the help of the Kimoyo beads T'Challa was able to stabilize Agent Ross after a bullet hit his spine during the shot out scene in the police station. This juxtaposition of the stereotype and the high

technology that is unimaginable or unexpected to be in Africa that add to the Afro futuristic nature of *Black Panther* film.

Furthermore, the costumes of W’Kabi, Killmonger, M’Baku as they opposed the truth regime of Wakanda in different or some similar ways enhanced the portrayal of their characters. Killmonger’s golden Jaguar suit, which was the first prototype rejected by T’Challa during the scene in Shuri’s laboratory, is important. The suit was presented as that meant to be seen and not inconspicuous like the Black Panther suit. With its gold necklace, the tip of which the suit sits, what Killmonger stood for could be deciphered. The suit was obvious and represents the challenge to the truth regime that Killmonger stood for. W’Kabi ensured that his costumes along with that of his warriors, which serves as both clothing and uniform, were used to support Killmonger in furtherance to their challenge of the established regime of truth.

Also, in the ritual combat scene at the waterfall, costumes in the form of clothing and accessories were used to identify each of the tribes in the country. The Merchant Tribe, who are dressed with turban-like materials on their head and thobes for dresses with their women adorned with various accessories, the Border Tribe with their dresses described above and their women dressed in multi-coloured wrappers, the Jabari Tribe of the mountains dressed in warrior raffia skirts and tops, the River Tribe with adornments of lip discs and Kente-patterned clothes, the Mining Tribe with their red body paintings and beaded skin on their heads have their own clothing also for identity and the Dora Milaje, who are the all-female guards of the royal family, could also be identified by their clothing. These all contributed to the societal regime of truth of Wakanda.

Furthermore, masks also played a role as costume to tell of societal truth regime in the film. Killmonger in the scene where the misidentified Wakandan artifact was stolen in a London

museum also stole a mask made from the face of an antelope. The mask was worn by him to cover his face when they bombed the police station and extracted Ulyses Klaue. It helped to hide him as he charted his path to Waknada, where he would challenge the established customs. Also, in the ritual combat scene, the mask became a weapon used by M'Baku to aid him in his fight against T'Challa who had then lost his own mask. The appearance of M'Baku's mask, which had the face of the gorilla, the symbol of the Jabari, was frightening. The mask as a costume in the film served as an element of power as it aided in the challenge of the societal regime of truth.

In addition to the above, the ring worn by the royal family is a symbol of power and identity for the Wakandan ruling class. This is seen in Police Station scene when T'Challa failed to attack his cousin Killmonger, who had come to extract the black market arms dealer Klaue. Immediately he saw his grandfather's ring, which all children in the royal household have a copy of, he knew Killmonger was a relative of his and he ceased all attack for the criminal to get away. His suspicion was however confirmed when he returned to Wakanda and he pestered Zuri, son of Badu, for the truth. The ring as a costume symbolises power and as an element of the recognition of the Wakandan truth regime.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

To address how costume projected Afrofuturism and Black superhero in *Black Panther*, the thesis began with the description of the historical representation of Black history in texts, and more specifically, on screen. After my introductory chapter, the second chapter traced the history of film in America and the exclusion of African Americans from proper representation and proper recognition in the American film industry. Part of the context of this history is the civil rights movement that would later include the Black Panther party (as I showed, this movement influenced the creation of the black superhero, *Black Panther*). I provided a history of films from late 1890s onwards, including *Birth of a Nation*, *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue* and *Guess who is coming to Dinner*. An important part of this discussion was what the emergence of African American filmmakers meant for the recognition of black people in American film. In the third chapter, I continued with my account of black film with a focus on the period from the 1970s till present. The account included the emergence of the Black Panther party in the the Civil Rights Movement in America and how that inspired the titular character of, *Black Panther*. I also discussed the concept of Afrofuturism in relation to the articulations of Black power and identity behind the development of a Black Superhero in *Black Panther*.

Chapter four discussed three important issues. First, I engaged Michel Foucault's theory of power to analyze the representation of power in *Black Panther* and how this is was reflected in the community of Wakanda. I explained how Michel Foucault identified sovereign power and subsequently reinterpreted the interpretation of power in modern society as something that takes the form of disciplinary power and Biopower. Sovereign power, according to Foucault, relates to the hierarchical order of relations of the King-subject status. Arguing that this has been replaced

by other forms of power, Foucault claims that disciplinary power expressed as the control of thought of the people is exercised through institutions such as schools, prisons, places of worship and other socializing agents. While teaching institutions are responsible for shaping thoughts, prisons and mental asylums serve as institutions for correcting those perceived to have veered off the established order of the society. This is where the idea of diffused power takes off and becomes more obvious in Biopower.

Foucault's idea of Biopower—as a power associated with notions about the survival of society—invariably, leads to a regime of truth, in which ideas considered necessary for the society's survival are woven into the fabric of the society. In chapter four, I discussed how power operated within Wakanda related in this manner: in the expectations made of the people of Wakanda in their relationship with the socio-economic and political order of their country. Through the state's cultivation of cultural ideals (such as the preservation of certain traditions), Wakandans came to embrace its regime of truth. I connected Wakandan's acceptance of monarchy as a form of political ordering was interpreted with the stage of political arrangement of Africa before colonialism and suggested that the producer of *Black Panther* chose this political arrangement for Wakanda to project is African past (as opposes to the diluted historical images of the West) but also importantly, to highlight Wakandan's need to maintain isolation and socioeconomic/political independence (part of its regime of truth).

Furthermore, I discussed the centrality of costume in the Afrofuturistic projection of power in *Black Panther*. How costume is important to the development of a superhero character and how this was used in demonstrating Afrofuturism and Black superhero was addressed in this research. Costume served as a motif for the debunking of the White savior complex by projecting an Afrofuturistic, super-heroic T'Challa.

Costume also helped with the dual representation of Wakanda as both a traditionally vibrant and technologically advanced society. The alignment of Akan Adinkra and the Kimoyo beads expressed Black power through costume. Kimoyo beads serve as a source of communication while the superhero costume worked well as a symbol of strength. African-culture-inspired costumes combined with digital effects in the film to express Wakanda's traditional African cultural identity as well as its technological advancement. Costume served to identify various tribes of Wakandan culture, especially during the warrior fall coronation rites. This projected an inter-ethnic unity African that is both actual-historical and aspirational-futuristic. To this end, African unity was a form of Afrofuturistic representation in the film.

The influence of *Black Panther* on African American community in the United States cannot be overemphasized. The reception of the film as well as the various influence it had on cosplay in America drives this point further home. *Black Panther* remains a source of inspiration for cosplay. Its attendant futuristic ideas continue to impress the minds of African Americans and to swell the impact of the film on African American community as well as Africans on the continent. However, the role that costume plays in projecting these Afrofuturistic ideals has been a fundamental focus of this research. This research was conducted on the conviction that limited attention has been paid to the role of costume in this projection. Other areas of potential future research abound but this research has made it a point of duty to interrogate how Black Superhero and Afrofuturism was projected in *Black Panther* through costume. That said, the level of hope and inspiration the film raises for a future Africa cannot be exhausted within this research.

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